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August 9, 1892.

No. 785.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

Vol. XXXI.



OR,

The Spook Steed of the Stone Corral.

A Romance of the Raided Ranches,

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THE GYPSY SPY," "TOLTEC TOM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SPECTER STEED.

THE clouds scudded low before a stiff breeze, vailing at times the faint light of the moon. The rank valley grass swayed noddingly in the direction of Prairie Gibraltar, which arose like a mass of deeper black against the background of the sky.

IN SPITE OF HIS FEARS OLD LONE HAND COULD NOT BE BUT PLEASED WITH THE
WAY THE SPECTER STEED WAS LEAVING HIS FOES.

Old Joe Connetty—"Lone Hand Joe," as he was known—lifted his head, glanced toward the buffalo-grass upland which stretched away for interminable leagues across the wide plains of Colorado, then bent his gaze again toward the dark patch outlined against the southern sky.

He had looked toward the upland because he fancied he heard there the faint hoof-strokes of a horse.

Prairie Gibraltar, lying on the banks of the crooked stream known as the Cimarron River, was beginning to have an uncanny reputation. It was in the days of the great cattle herds, and but a short time after the buffalo had vanished forever from those rich grazing grounds.

The face uplifted to the cloudy sky was that of a small and somewhat wizened man, long past middle life. Yet, it was a strong, aggressive face, with keen, determined eyes, and a resolute chin, covered with a scanty beard.

Connetty, who had for many years been known as Lone Hand Joe, was a confirmed nomad. His life had been spent largely in the open air, on the plains or in the mountains. He had once been a lone trapper; then a lone hide-hunter, but of late had roamed around among the ranches, and always was a welcome guest.

His horse was tethered in a willow clump, nearly a half-mile away, and he had crawled up under shadow of the night to get a closer peep at the stronghold which had long been a home for thieves, but which a late report stated had been abandoned because of certain mysterious manifestations that had frightened the free-booting gentry who dwelt therein.

Concerning this abandonment, the suspicious Joe had his doubts; and they were not lessened by certain things he had witnessed from the willow covert that afternoon.

The sounds heard on the upland were nearer, now, and he knew he was not mistaken in thinking them the hoof-beats of a horse. He could see the brow of the upland very well from his recumbent position, and kept his eyes fixed on it as the horse seemed to near that point. But when he was sure the animal was descending the slope in his direction, he could not even then make out its form because of the obscuration of the moon.

Suddenly a low and inarticulate cry broke from his lips, and he burrowed still deeper in the waving grass. All at once the horse had become visible. It had not been revealed by the light of the moon, but was outlined by a glow which seemed to emanate from its own body.

It was certainly a startling appearance. The light which the horse emitted from its hairy hide—if that were really the source of the glow—was of a sickly cast, resembling in a large degree the light which comes from a glow-worm.

The horse bore a rider, though he was almost invisible. Only his legs and a part of the saddle could be seen. The upper portion of his body faded away into the gloom.

"That beats me!" Old Lone Hand muttered, as he flattened himself in the grass. "I've traveled from California to Kalamazoo, from Johnny Bull's northern lakes to the mountains of Mexico, an' this is the fu'st time I ever run ag'in' a creeper like that! A reg'lar walkin' jack-o'-my-lantern, with four legs an' a flowin' tail, an' hoof-beats that sounds till you kin hear 'em. If it wuzn't fer that last, I'd know it wuz a ghost. But a ghost wouldn't shorely tromp down the grass that-a-way!"

Notwithstanding the seeming levity of these comments, Old Joe was deeply stirred by the singular sight. Like most men living a life such as his, his mind had become strongly tinged with superstition. It is apt to be the way with ignorant folk who live close to the heart of nature. There are so many unexplainable wonders in earth and sky, in air and water, which they can only account for by reference to supernatural agencies. Of this class of men, the untutored savage is the truest type.

The horse was very near, now; so near that it could be plainly seen; and it passed within a few yards of Old Joe's hiding-place.

But, was it a horse? And was that a man seated on his back, whose legs only were visible? If the strange thing was really an animal, whence came that singular glow?

Old Joe looked at it, wistfully, and drew a deep breath of relief as it passed on. His breathing was oppressed; and creepy, indescribable sensations were making a highway of his spine. It was far pleasanter to view the thing, whatever it was, from a distance.

"In the jogerfy o' my halcyon youth I use to read that the sun wuz the only creeper that shines by its own light. But I'm ready to swear that

that jogerfy-maker wuz a liar an' a hoss-thief!"

He puckered his thin lips as he said this, and craned his neck and bent his head to watch the retreating vision.

A fear of it was strong on him, but this was overcome in a great measure by a feeling of intense curiosity. He wriggled to an upright position, took another breathless look, and then stole softly after the shining horse.

What he had witnessed that afternoon from the willow clump was the inspiring cause of this courageous action. He believed he had seen men on the white walls of Prairie Gibraltar; and if the thieves were still there, it was possible they knew something of this horse, and were making use of it for a purpose.

At any rate, it was going straight toward the stronghold, and the old freelance greatly desired to see what effect its coming would have on the outlaws whom he believed to be lying in concealment behind those rocky walls.

"Hyer goes!" he breathlessly panted, as he hurried on at the best speed his caution would allow. "Neck er nothin', is my motto! I can't say that I specially hankers after chasin' spooks, an' wraiths, an' fiery horses, but a chance like this don't come more'n onc'e in a lifetime. If it's a plum shore enough ghost, I reckon it'll slide into the earth, or fly up into the sky, or make itself scarce mighty sudden an' mysterious. If it's a reel hoss, with some shinin' stuff rubbed onto it, it won't be able to do anything of the kind. Anyway, hyer goes!"

The horse was now near the outer barrier of the stronghold. It was not hastening its speed, but was moving onward at the same gait as when he had first seen it.

Old Lone Hand was walking rapidly, though silently, anxious to get near enough to see where it should go when it passed around that wall. But it never passed around the wall; or, if it did, he did not behold the movement. When within less than a rod of the barrier, it vanished as suddenly as it had come into view, leaving the trailer to stare bewilderedly into the gloom.

He recoiled with a gasping cry, as if he had been struck a blow, and it was many minutes before he could recover from the mental shock this disappearance gave him.

"That do beat all!" sinking tremulously to the earth. "Didn't go neither into the ground ner into the sky. Jist went out like a lamp, puff!—that way, when a feller blows on the flame!"

The old nomad was shaking with nervousness, and his teeth chattered, even as he spoke.

Prairie Gibraltar lay before him grim and silent, as stern and forbidding in appearance as its Mediterranean prototype. The wind souged through the grass and sung mournfully as it chafed against the jagged rocks. Below him Connetty could hear the gurgle of the stream. A prairie-dog owl swooped down overhead with its harsh scolding, and he crouched in terror, thinking for a moment it was a being from the spirit world.

He drew himself up with an effort and passed a horny hand across his forehead, as if by that act to clear the cobwebs from his brain. He glared in the direction of the owl's flight and shook his fist angrily at the inoffensive creature that had so frightened him.

"I'm gittin' myself ready fer a lunatic asylum!" he growled. "Tromped the prairie fer more years than I kin recollect, an' now git skeered out o' my seven senses by a screechin' dog-owl! Next thing I know, I'll be runnin' away from the wind!"

He looked again toward Prairie Gibraltar, only to see it as before, harsh in outline and silent as the grave.

"I'low I'd do the most sensible thing o' my life, if I'd take the back-track," he argued. "This thing o' 'vestigatin' ghosts might do fer some men, but it don't please me more'n common!"

Notwithstanding this declaration, he found it impossible to tear himself from the spot. What he had seen beld for him a strong fascination. There might be danger in going ahead—unknown perils too horrible for thought—but he could not persuade himself to beat a retreat.

"Likely they's a hole there which the thing went into," he said, trying to screw his courage to the sticking-place.

It was not plain to him how even if there was a hole the horse could disappear as he had seen it do; but he deceived himself with the thought, and again wriggled forward.

When he gained the point where the horse had vanished, he found no opening in the earth. But he did discover something which promised to have a marked bearing on the case. It was a

hoof-print; and when he felt further, his trained fingers alighted on others. It did not seem possible that a phantom horse would make so material a thing as a well-defined mark in the soil.

"I'm a goin' to git at the meanin' o' this thing!" he asserted, as he crawled on, feeling in front of him for the tell-tale and guiding hoof-prints. "The thing 'at made these ain't no spirit, whatever it is. If it wuz covered with shinin' stuff, though, I can't see how the rider rubbed the dratted truck off! Ner how he put it on so quick!" recalling the manner in which the horse had first come into view.

The prints led him around an angle of the wall, down a flinty slope by the river-side, and beyond that for a considerable distance. The character of the ground made the trailing difficult, and in paying close attention to the work in hand, he looked about him but little.

When the spy lifted his head again, it was to give another start. A short distance away was a crater-like inclosure, and within it was standing the phantom horse. It was riderless, now, and there seemed to be no saddle on it. Its head was drooped as if from weariness. Yet, over all, from flowing mane to streaming tail, was that dull glow which had already so mystified Old Joe.

"It must be a hoss!" was his positive assertion, regathering his courage for a further advance. "It can't be nothin' else! There's been somethin' rubbed on its hair to make it shine that way. Likely a trick of the thieves to skeer honest people an' keep 'em frum comin' round hyer. I've heerd o' these hyer luminous paints an' phosphorus an' sich, an' it must be somethin' o' that kind."

He drew a match from a metallic case, touched the match-head to his tongue to moisten it, and rubbed it on the palm of his hand. The marks made by the match-head shone in the darkness very like the coat of the horse.

"That's jist it!" with a sagacious wag of his head. "They've fixed him up in that way, somehow, an' he's only a common hoss, after all. An' I never wuz afeard o' hosses!"

He hitched forward once more, and was soon near the crater-like corral. He discovered that there were other horses within the corral, though he had not been able to see them. He could barely see them now, and judged of the number more by the sounds made by their breathing than in any other way.

He remained quiet for a time to assure himself that no human presence was near; then made his way over the ragged wall of rock into this natural corral.

The horses appeared not to fear him, and permitted Old Lone Hand to approach without manifesting terror. He shivered a little as he crept toward the one whose coat shone so strangely. At the last moment he felt like beating a retreat. But he went on, and laid his hand on the horse's mane. He examined the hairy coat, rubbing his hands up and down it to ascertain if possible the cause of that strange light. There was no smeary, waxy substance, as he had expected. The hair seemed natural and untampered with; and he remained as much puzzled as ever.

From the corral he turned toward the stronghold itself, seeking a solution there. When he had passed over a dozen yards he turned to look again at the horse. Lo! It was not to be seen! Apparently the animal had gone from the place!

With anything but a comfortable sensation, Connetty continued to creep over the rocks, bending his steps, however, in the direction of the open prairie, so that he could make a break for liberty, should it seem necessary.

At one point, opposite the stronghold itself, a perpendicular surface of white rock arose sheer from the earth, evidently unscalable to man or beast. As he arrived in front of this, the horse he had so short a time before examined, appeared on the side of this almost upright wall of rock; and it again bore on its back a rider.

There was about both horseman and animal a light that was even stranger than that which Old Joe had first beheld. It was not a glare; neither was it the glow which before had seemed so much like phosphorescence. It was a whitish, penetrating light, in the midst of which the horse and rider seemed suspended, and it threw surrounding objects into the deepest gloom.

In spite of the fear that almost paralyzed his energies, the resolute old man plucked out one of his revolvers and fired straight at the spectral horse. It was so large an object he knew he could not miss it. And he did not miss it! He saw the bullet splinter the rocky surface, and knew the leaden missile had passed through the animal, if animal it was. But the shot had no appreciable effect. Horse and rider continued

to glide upward as if nothing had been done to interfere with their movement; and a moment later disappeared among the overhanging shadows.

The sight was too much for Old Lone Hand's nerves, strong as they were. He gave a yell of fear, scrambled down the rough incline, and raced wildly for the willow clump—a demoralized detective!

CHAPTER II.

A WILD STAMPEDE.

PRAIRIE GIBALTAR had received its name from its strength as a natural stronghold. It was almost impregnable to assault from without. Safe within its sheltering walls, a few determined and desperate men might hold a large force at bay until food and ammunition were exhausted. Water could be had in abundance, for Cimarron River flowed only a few feet distant, and the way to and from it was well protected from the shots of marksmen. Thus, in many respects the place resembled the great British fortress; and the wide-reaching prairie, stretching out to illimitable distances, assisted in conferring on it the name: Prairie Gibraltar.

Because of its impregnability it had for many years been the hiding-place and headquarters of plains outcasts and raiders. Since the cattle herds had come into the country these desperadoes had made themselves especially mischievous by running off stock. For a time they were strong enough to set the ranchmen at defiance, but had suffered reverses of late, and had, therefore, grown extremely cautious.

And now, only a few weeks before, it had been given out that the cattle-stealers had wholly abandoned Prairie Gibraltar; and that they had done so because of certain mysterious and ghostly appearances.

These reports did not take very definite shape, but the current belief appeared to be that one of the thieves and his horse had been slain in a fight with the ranchmen, and that every night he presented himself before the stronghold, riding his ghostly steed, for the purpose of urging his old companions to avenge his death. If that was the aim of his coming, it failed; the only effect being to drive these friends from their old hiding-place. Such was the gist of the rumor given in various shapes, and which was coming to be generally believed by the men of the ranches.

Old Joe Connetty had heard it, and his mind reverted to it more strongly than ever as he fled from the apparition which had been proof against his bullet.

"I can't say that I hankers to git clost to the thing ag'in!" he mumbled, as he hurried on, slipping and sliding and occasionally falling when his feet became tangled in the long grass. "If 'tain't spirits, it looks enough like 'em to suit me. If anybody else wants to 'vestigate it, they kin. I'm a-goin' to cut out o' hyer. Hosses that you kin rub your hands over, an' feel the hair uv 'um one minute, then shoot clean through 'um without tetchin' 'um the next! Excuse me! Waugh!"

And he did "cut out," when he gained his horse, turning willingly away from the place that a short half-hour before had so attracted him.

"I think I'll see what Phil Sidney's got to say about this," giving the willing beast free rein. "Sidney's a-knowin' chap, if he is young, an' mebbe he'll hev some idees on the subjec'. I hain't!"

He set his jaws firmly, as he made this latter declaration. He had thought of the matter already until his brain was in a whirl, and he resolved to think of it no longer; a thing which he quickly discovered to be impossible.

Philip Sidney's ranch lay up the Cimarron River. It was the nearest one to Prairie Gibraltar, and in distance was not over a two hours' ride from that place.

Sidney had suffered, in conjunction with his fellow cattlemen, and had been active in his efforts to aid them in ridding the country of the thieves. Because of this, his ranch had been once boldly raided by the desperadoes and one of his cowboys killed. Therefore, no one was better pleased than he at the rumor that the cattle-lifters meant to leave, or had left, the country. If they remained, he felt he must surely go, or suffer financial ruin.

His place was known as the "Good Cheer Ranch," because of the hospitality which it always afforded; and because of this, and for the further reason that Lone Hand and young Sidney were firm friends, Old Connetty set his face toward this ranch.

In spite of his wish to think no more of the phantom horse the things he had that night

witnessed were not out of his mind a minute during the ride.

It was long past midnight when he drew near the ranch buildings of the Good Cheer, and he was immediately made aware that something unusual was occurring, by the loud outcries that reached him.

He sat erect in the saddle, with feet thrust hard against the stirrups, as he hearkened to the confused sounds.

"It's a stampede!" he exclaimed. "It must be that! But, 'tain't a night fer a stampede. I reckon them p'izen cattle-lifters air ag'in at their work. When I seen that creepy thing at Prairie Gibraltar, I knowed they hadn't left the country."

This last was a conclusion just reached at that moment, though it seemed to him he had settled the point long before.

He set spurs to his horse and galloped forward, guiding the animal in the direction from which the hubbub proceeded.

He soon found himself on the edge of a moving mass of horns and hair, which he knew to be the stampeding herds of young Sidney. Joe uttered a bitter imprecation as the maddened animals poured by him, bellowing wildly and throwing up a dust-cloud that made the night even darker than before.

"It's the work o' them cussid cattle-thieves!" he gritted, pulling in his horse and vainly attempting to turn the frightened herd.

From far away he heard the voices of men, but whether they were those of Sidney's cowboys or of the cattle-rustlers he could not tell. Alone he could do nothing with the cattle, and he wheeled his horse again and rode in the direction of the voices.

As he came closer to them, Connetty knew the horsemen (whom he could now dimly see), were the cowboys of the Good Cheer Ranch, and he boldly approached them.

Philip Sidney was in the midst of his men, who were riding hither and thither, doing all they could to check the mad rush of the herds.

There were other voices now to be heard far away, and Old Joe was sure these were the voices of the cattle-thieves.

He singled Philip Sidney out even in the darkness, rode to his side, and shouted:

"The rustlers air over yander, pard. Better make a charge on 'um. It'll be the quickest way to stop the steers."

In accordance with this advice, Sidney grouped a few of his men about himself and the old nomad, and raced with them toward the thieves, leaving the remnant of his little force to continue their efforts to make the cattle "mill."

It was ticklish and risky work, this racing over the prairie in the darkness. The many holes made by badgers and prairie dogs rendered it peculiarly perilous. Neither horse nor rider could see what was in front, and a step into one of these holes might mean a broken leg to the horse, and a broken neck or severe injuries to the man who bestrode him. But the cowboys did not hesitate because of this, and dashed away at the word of command, as if such risks were every-day occurrences.

They did not come up with the raiders, however, though at one time they pressed the rascals hard. The front of the flying herds had for some reason become split into fragments, and the marauders separated in the same manner. It seemed likely they would succeed in so scattering the herds that they could not fail to secure and drive away a number of the cattle; and this the cowboys could do little to prevent, because of the gloom.

Near daybreak Old Lone Hand and Sidney, who had kept well together throughout it all, turned back toward the ranch buildings on the banks of the Cimarron. The cattle had been brought fairly well under control, and, except those that had entirely escaped, were being held by the cowboys.

"I wanted ye to ride back with me," Connetty remarked, in explanation of his request to that effect, "so that I might talk over a mighty curious circumstance with ye. It's the rummest thing I've run ag'in lately; an' I've thought it might hev somethin' to do with this stampede."

The two were riding slowly along, resting their tired horses.

"What is it about?"

Thus invited, Old Lone Hand plunged into a recital of the strange things he had seen at Prairie Gibraltar. They were singular enough to arouse Sidney's keenest interest.

"Come into the house," the young man requested, when the buildings were reached. "That thing will stand a good deal of talking over. You say you had your hands on the horse?"

"Yes; an' shot at it, too! An' the bullet went plum through it without hurtin' it a mite. 'Twus fer all the world jist like shootin' through a cloud!"

Philip Sidney's face, clearly revealed now by the lamp, expressed earnestness as well as curiosity. It was strongly marked and fairly handsome; the face of a young man who is accustomed to rely on himself, and who feels that he is conquering for himself a place in the world.

The young man was dressed in cowboy garb, which well became his strongly knit and upright form. There was, of course, the inevitable big white hat, and the high-heeled riding-boots with their jingling spurs.

"It's ridiculous to talk of a spirit horse!" he declared, as he turned Connetty's statement over in his mind. "I don't believe that the spirits of men ever return to earth; and as for horses, I'm not sure that they have any spirits. They may have, but we're not usually taught to think so. The ghost idea is sheerest nonsense!"

Joe looked as if he would like to accept this theory if he could.

"I hope you're right," was his quiet observation. "Spirits ain't pleasant things to tackle."

"It's plain the thieves haven't left Prairie Gibraltar; and I'm of the opinion that the men who rustled the cattle to-night were from there. This horse mystery is probably a game of theirs to keep people from visiting the place. And if that is so, it shows they are as strong and defiant as they once were. I think we'd better look into the matter."

"I'm with ye," Old Joe averred, "though I ain't a-pinin' to see that thing ag'in. But if you're in earnest, I'll stand by ye. All I can say is, if they're playin' a game with a boss, they've got the creeter fer the business. That thing 'ud do to 'luminat' a circus with. The only trouble 'ud be that it might go out of a sudden an' shet off the performance!"

CHAPTER III.

AN UNLUCKY INTERFERENCE.

"I DON'T reckon the shinin' kin be seen in daylight!"

This remark was made many hours after the interview in the ranch-house. The time was near the close of the following day, and Old Joe and Sidney were in hiding among the willows a short distance above the prairie stronghold.

From their position they could get a fair view of the rocky fortress, and of the corral in which Old Lone Hand had beheld the phantom horse. Some horses were in the inclosure, but none which seemed to fit the description which Joe had given. Hence the remark.

"I think I'll try to get a closer look," decided Sidney, after they had surveyed the place for a long time. "The fact that there are horses there shows there must be men there."

Joe was about to object, but Sidney wriggled away through the willows, keeping himself well concealed from enemies by the interposition of a projecting granite point.

"I'll try ter cover yer retreat if ye git into a muss," Old Joe whispered after him, when he saw that dissuasion was useless.

Sidney answered by a backward smile, and kept on.

This advance was destined to bring consequences little dreamed of at the moment. The only thing Sidney feared was that he might be sighted and shot at from the walls.

The corral was not visible during his progress—at least not until he had rounded the rocky point. Then he beheld a sight which caused him to crouch closer against the ledge.

A woman was standing within the corral, near the horses, and she was followed shortly by a man who came from some point not to be seen by the spy.

Philip Sidney had thought there might be men behind the walls, but he had never dreamed of a woman being there. She was young, too; and, what took his eye far more, was decidedly handsome.

She was of the brunette type, with erect, graceful carriage, and she held her head like a queen.

They were so close to the young man that he could hear their words.

"I told you not to follow me here!" the woman exclaimed, somewhat snappishly, as she faced about and gave the man a look of scorn. "Why do you annoy me so, Ben Stetson? If you had a thimbleful of modesty or sense, you'd let me alone!"

The fellow addressed as Ben Stetson was a man of bulky frame, and with a face that had in it a brutal look. But for this evident brutality, he might have been called handsome, for his features were regular in contour. Just now he

seemed to be slightly under the influence of liquor, and inclined to insolence.

"I'll not go away till I want to!" glaring at her doggedly. "I told ye I'd foller ye out hyer, an' I'm a man what keeps my word every time!"

"And I told you that if you continued to trouble me, I'd report you to father, and you'd get a hole through you for your pains."

"She is a regular spitfire," Sidney muttered, liking her all the more for her determined resistance to the ruffian's advances. "If that chap was any piece of a man, he'd leave her alone. But I reckon he left his sense behind him when he loaded up with that jag of whisky. What a fool a little liquor does make of some men!"

Stetson advanced threateningly on the girl, and Sidney's fingers worked like the claws of a bird, showing how he longed to clutch the rascal by the throat.

"Will you leave me alone, Ben Stetson?" she commanded, retreating a step and standing at bay.

"I won't, unless you take back what you said awhile ago!"

"I sha'n't take anything back!" drawing herself up, wrathfully.

As she stood thus, with her cheeks flushed, and her eyes flashing, she formed as pretty a picture as Phil Sidney had ever seen.

"My! But she's a beauty!"

"Take back what you said to me awhile ago!"

"I said that you were a brute and a fool, and that I wouldn't marry you if you was the last man on earth! That's what I then said, and now I say it again!"

"Good for you! You're a brick!"

This from Sidney, in whispered exultation.

The young cattleman's interest was being aroused to a feverish pitch. Already he felt like springing out and collaring Ben Stetson, although to his knowledge he had never seen either of the parties before. This feeling became overpowering as he witnessed the result of her defiance.

Angered beyond measure by her words, and rendered reckless by the liquor he had taken, the outlaw flew at her savagely, and, grasping her by the hair, jerked her fiercely backward.

The assault was made so quickly that she was not given time to avoid it. The pull hurled her to the ground; and, as she lay there, panting and frightened, Stetson raised his heavy boot as if to kick her.

This was too much for the witness in hiding. When he saw that, he lost his head. Casting discretion to the winds, he leaped over the rocky wall and was on the ruffian before that individual knew of his presence.

Stetson would have been given no warning at all, if Sidney had not uttered a shout meant to attract Old Connelly.

"You white-livered puppy!" he cried, as he dealt the outlaw a stinging blow. "Kick a woman, would you! And a woman who is already down! I'll teach you a lesson in manners, you ruffian!"

His blood was on fire, and he was in a thoroughly reckless mood.

The woman gave a little scream as she saw him and heard his words, but he turned his entire attention to Stetson, for the time giving her no heed whatever.

Stetson attempted to square about to return the blow, when another heavy right-hander caught him under the chin and laid him flat on his back. But it did not knock him senseless; and, as Sidney rushed at him, he pulled out his revolver and fired.

Luckily, he was so shaken and his excitement so great, that the bullet sped wildly; and before he could fire again, Sidney knocked the revolver from his grasp and leaped on him.

Joe had heard his friend's call for help. From his position he had a partial view of the forms within the corral, and his instant supposition was that Sidney had been surprised and attacked. He did not stop to question about it, however. Sidney was in trouble and needed his assistance. That was sufficient to bring him forward at the top of his speed.

In spite of his age, he cleared the rocky wall at a bound, and was at Sidney's side when the latter threw himself on the prostrate outlaw.

But his coming was rather in the nature of a misfortune. The sound of Ben Stetson's revolver-shot had penetrated to the interior of the stronghold, and before the friends were aware of it, they were surrounded!

The outlaws seemed to rise out of the ground, so suddenly did they appear. Old Joe, hurrying to Sidney's side, was plucked backward

and his arms pinioned by strong hands; while Sidney was seized and drawn bodily from his fallen foe.

Too late Sidney learned that he had been extremely unwise in his hasty action, and that he and his old pard were likely to suffer severely for his imprudence.

CHAPTER IV.

WITHIN THE SECRET CHAMBERS.

THE outlaws were not only greatly surprised, but somewhat frightened on finding those two men within the corral. It argued that there were more outside.

They immediately gathered about the prisoners, and with angry words urged them toward the secret openings into the interior of Prairie Gibraltar.

Sidney and Lone Hand were silent—the former from chagrin, and the latter because he always believed that "least said, the soonest mended."

Sidney was inclined to blame himself without stint for what had occurred. But for his rash impetuosity, he and Old Joe might still be free men, reclining in safe concealment on the slope. He had rushed to the girl's assistance without giving the least thought of consequences, and had brought Old Joe into the snare with himself.

Ben Stetson, as soon as released, had made a dive for his revolver, and would have shot the young rancher had he not been prevented. He was wild with rage and humiliation, and stern words were necessary to hold him in subjection.

The girl had given Sidney and his friends a keen glance, and then had vanished, her retreat being concealed by the rush and excitement. Sidney felt that this was a poor recompense for his reckless bravery.

They were scarcely given time to look about the place in which they now found themselves, but what they got to see of it showed them its great advantages as a natural fortification. The corral was merely an extension of the rocky walls, completely open at that point to the sky. There was a natural gateway through it, but this was now barred by stones and strong timbers to prevent the horses from getting out. The walls of the corral were easily scalable to men, but they were rather high for a horse to leap readily.

Of the several horses now huddling frightenedly at the further end of the inclosure, none seemed to Old Joe to resemble the animal which had so mystified him on the previous night. There was certainly none there with a luminous coat; though he reasoned that it might be there, and that the coat only shone in the darkness—a very reasonable inference.

The openings into the interior of Prairie Gibraltar were comparatively small, and not to be seen from the outside. They were further screened by large stones rolled in front of them; these stones serving also to prevent the ingress of hostile bullets.

It was quickly apparent that the leader of the outlaws was not at home, and Connelly and Sidney naturally thought it possible he was at the head of the party of rustlers who had secured some of Sidney's cattle.

This leader, whose name was Romero, was known throughout the country as Maverick Bill, for the reason that he preferred to gain unlawful possession of all unbranded cattle he could lay his hands on to taking those that had marks of ownership on them. The mavericks could always be more readily disposed of.

The treatment accorded to Sidney and the Old Nomad was not of the kindest. They were urged forward with cuffs, kicks and curses, and with threats that if they cried out to warn their supposed friends they would be summarily disposed of. The blows dealt Old Joe stung Sidney more keenly than did even those that fell on his own person. Old Joe had sought to help him, and this was his payment.

The interior of Prairie Gibraltar, so far as they could determine on being first conducted into it, consisted of a series of underground chambers, with many small openings here and there that let in the air and sunlight. While the chambers appeared to be underground, they were really above the general surface of the country; and the natural loopholes with which the walls were perforated gave a fair outlook on the surrounding prairie.

In some respects the strange mass of jumbled rock known as Prairie Gibraltar resembled the old lava beds in which the Modocs made their last stand. But Prairie Gibraltar was not composed of lava. It was principally white stone, cemented and bound together by what seemed to

be a natural concrete. There was much stone along the river at that point, and the singular rocky pile appeared to have been upheaved and thrown into its present honeycombed condition by some long-past convulsion of nature.

The prisoners were bound as soon as they were forced into the chambers, and given to understand that if they made any effort to escape they would be instantly shot.

Scouts had already been sent out to look the country carefully over, and ascertain the strength of the cowboy force which was presumed to be near. The marauders were greatly excited, and men were posted by them at the loopholes to be ready to repel any attack. These, with the ones sent out, constituted almost the entire available force, for the rustlers then at home numbered considerably less than a dozen men.

Sidney and the veteran watched these preparations with anxious eyes. They knew there was no danger of an assault from without, but the scope of the preparations and the promptness with which everything was done, showed how difficult it would be for any but an overwhelming number to take the place by storm. It convinced them that if Prairie Gibraltar ever fell, it would be more through subtlety or treachery than open fighting.

The words of the outlaws as they discussed the situation told the anxious captives that Maverick Bill was expected home within a short time. To warn him of the supposed danger a spy had been sent sneaking through the valley grass to the prairie beyond.

Sidney could not help smiling a little, as he witnessed all this anxiety and worry. He was rewarded for it by a stern look and a threat.

"You won't feel so fine, my young gamecock, when Maverick Bill gits hyer. It's my opinion that he'll give both o' ye a mighty short shrift!"

"If you'd asked us any questions, or given us any chance to talk, we could have told you that you're putting yourselves to a great deal of unnecessary trouble."

This speech was not so ill-considered as it may appear. It would have been useless to have attempted to scare these men by making them think there were friends of the prisoners outside ready to come to their rescue. The deception must soon be discovered. By plain speaking a point might even be gained.

"It's my fault we got in here," the young man confessed, speaking as much for the benefit of Old Joe as for the outlaw to whom the words were addressed. "Perhaps I was a little silly in rushing into danger, but no chap with a spark of manhood about him could see a great big hulk abusing and kicking a woman without interfering. That's what I did, and that's what got us here. I shouldn't care so much, if it wasn't for my friend. He simply came to help me when I called out."

The outlaw was listening not unkindly.

"You sling that story to the captain when he comes, an' it mayn't go hard with you, though the captain is p'izen death on any man that's unlucky enough to poke his head into this hole. Did you say Panhandle Ben actually kicked the girl?"

"So, that's his handle, is it? She called him Ben Stetson. He didn't exactly kick her, but he threw her down and raised his foot to kick her, when I interfered and stopped his game. I think he would have hurt her bad, for he was in an ugly temper."

"Panhandle al'ays was a dirty dog!" looking around to make sure he could not be overheard. "You may bet yer boots old Maverick'll make it hot fer him fer that!"

"Who is she, anyway?" unable to longer control his curiosity and glad of the chance to question this man. "Is Maverick Bill her father? What's her name?"

He crowded the questions on each other, in his eagerness.

"She's old Maverick's daughter, you bet! and he thinks a pile of her, though he do abuse her owdacious, sometimes. But if he cusses at her a bit, an' even venters to whip her now an' then, he don't 'low no other man to do it. 'That's my heifer,' he al'ays says; an' he says it in a way to make yer hair raise up. I wouldn't be in Panhandle's boots fer a gold mine!"

He spoke earnestly, showing some little sympathy for the girl and the young man who had attempted to help her, but perhaps more of ill-will toward Panhandle Ben. It was apparent he hoped his statements would be prophecies.

"You haven't told me her name?" Sidney reminded him.

"Oh, I forgot. It's Irene—Irene Romero!"

Philip Sidney gave it many mental repetitions.

It was a pleasant-sounding name, and had even a suggestion of the romantic about it. He decided it was a very pretty name:—almost as pretty as the girl who bore it.

Throughout the colloquy Old Connetty remained sternly silent, venturing not a sentence. He was studying the situation; wondering how he and Sidney were to get out of the scrape. He realized the perils of their position even more than did the young man.

Ben Stetson kept away from the captives, and away from Irene. He did not even occupy himself with the search for the supposed cowboys. He was in an angry and sullen mood. He had been treated roughly. He did not see that he had done anything wrong, and he resented the affront he conceived to have been put upon him.

In addition to this, he was in great fear of the coming of Maverick Bill, and he burned to avenge himself on Philip Sidney. He felt that Sidney was the prime cause of all the present trouble, and he swore he would be even with him for it before he left the place.

He went out to the corral, and looked far over the prairie to see if there was a dust-cloud anywhere, indicating Maverick's approach. He had resolved to leave Prairie Gibraltar forever. He would leave it, and escape the results of Maverick's anger; but not until he had settled with Philip Sidney!

"I'll kill him for that!" he mumbled, as he shaded his eyes with his hands, thinking of the young cattleman, instead of the leader for whose approach he was looking. "When he jumps onto Panhandle Ben, he tackles the wrong dog. Talk about me bein' drunk! If that feller hadn't been crazy wild drunk, he wouldn't 'a' never come over that wall in sich a fool fashion as that."

Panhandle fancied he was in love with Irene Romero, and much against her will he persisted in telling her so. It did not matter to him that she repulsed him time and again. These repulses only made him the more resolute and aggressive. She had insulted him, and he had hurled her to the earth and lifted a foot to kick her.

He was sorry for that now, but he justified it by her taunting manner.

He knew, however, that regret for a thing of that kind would have little weight with Maverick Bill. He felt sure she would go to Maverick with the story as soon as the chief arrived, and if Maverick chanced to be in an ugly mood, Panhandle was pretty certain to hear from him at once.

"She said she'd have me shot for that!" with rankling remembrance. "That's somethin' like hangin'! Ketchin' comes first. If Maverick don't git hyer in a hurry, he'll not git a chance to shoot me."

Then, reflectively:

"Less'n he does it when I come back!"

After carefully glancing about to see that he was unobserved, he approached the place where the saddles and bridles were kept, and arranged some of these so they could be easily got at.

He then returned to his post of observation and continued his watching of the horizon-bounded prairie.

CHAPTER V.

THE EFFECT OF A KNIFE STROKE.

THE outlaws were soon able to assure themselves that their fears of an assault were groundless. Nothing was to be discovered on the prairie or in the valley, except the horses which Sidney and Old Joe had tethered in the willow clump. These were brought in and added to the little bunch in the corral.

Darkness came, but it did not bring Maverick Bill. This was in exact accordance with the wishes of the outlaw whose long residence in the Panhandle country of Texas had given him the title of Panhandle Ben. Maverick's delay would enable him to execute his plans and escape without difficulty.

When the night was sufficiently advanced to conceal his treacherous movements, he again visited the corral; and selected two of the best horses it contained, which he saddled and bridled, and placed ready for use.

He had become more desperate and determined with the wearing away of the effects of the liquor. He knew Maverick would never forgive him for the violence done the girl. His fancied love for her now made him resolve to take her with him, inasmuch as he felt compelled to go. That was why he provided two horses. One of them was fitted with her saddle.

He realized that haste might mean the success or failure of his plan, but he was engaged in a task in which hurry was not admissible. What he meant to do, must be done cautiously.

He returned to the interior of the stronghold, and, unnoticed, marked the resting-place of Philip Sidney. He meant to settle matters with Sidney before leaving.

Panhandle Ben was a thoroughly bad and vicious man, with scarcely a redeeming trait in his composition. The contemplation of murder sat lightly on his conscience, if he can be said to have had one.

Philip Sidney and Old Lone Hand were lying near together in a little pocket which jutted off from one of the principal chambers. They were not sleeping, though they were tired enough to feel the need of such rest; but were conversing in low tones. They had quietly talked the situation over, and endeavored to devise some means of getting away, but could hit on nothing. Only for the cheery words of the old man, Sidney would have lapsed into utter despair. There was little of a pleasing character in the outlook, but Old Joe managed to make the best of every situation.

Their low conversation assisted Panhandle Ben in noting their exact positions, and when he had done this he beat a retreat to make further preparations.

Guards had been posted on the walls, and a scout or two out on the prairie, and as nothing of a startling character had occurred since the sudden appearance of the men who were now prisoners, the remnant of the outlaws disposed themselves for sleep after their usual fashion. Connetty and Sidney had been given something to eat, at which time an examination of their bonds had showed them to be secure.

Ben Stetson waited until the sounds of heavy breathing assured him his comrades were oblivious to all things mundane, when he arose and crept toward the prisoners, knife in hand. He had lain down with the others for purposes of deception.

The only light penetrating to the interior was when the struggling moon occasionally shone in through a crevice, and this was of a fitful, and inefficient character. It suited Stetson very well, however, for his contemplated deed was not of a kind to bear strong inspection. What light there was, was enough to show him the forms of the captives, and he had previously assured himself which of these was Phil Sidney.

Like a creeping panther, he stole through the gloom, his breathing suppressed, and the knife held firmly.

Irene Romero was sleeping in her own little apartment a few yards away, as he believed. At any rate, he had seen her retire to that place, and whether she were asleep or awake would make little difference.

Sidney and his pard were not asleep, as Stetson thus advanced on them, but they had discontinued their conversation for lack of something to talk about. Neither could suggest anything likely to bring them immediate aid, and each was now busy with his own reflections.

Suddenly the form of Ben Stetson loomed dimly through the gloom at their side, both seeing him at the same time. They could see, too, that he held a knife in his hand, and it required no keen glance to know what he had come for.

Finding that his approach had been discovered, Stetson leaped at Sidney with a vicious snarl, at the same time uplifting the knife to strike.

"Ware there!" Joe shouted, in a very agony of terror, as he beheld the dully-shining steel descending.

Though bound, he lifted himself partially, and with his corded feet lunged at the would-be assassin. Fortunately for Sidney, Old Joe's heavy boots caught Stetson in the stomach and hurled him backward.

The knife, instead of reaching Sidney's breast, as the desperado intended it should, struck the thongs that bound Sidney's uplifted wrists and severed them.

Old Lone Hand's shout was loud enough to arouse the outlaws; and Stetson, feeling sure the knife had gone true to its aim, gathered himself up and fled, leaving the weapon to lie where it had fallen.

As he sped from the place, the confused sounds all about him told that the outlaws were tumbling out in anticipation of an attack.

With a feeling of jubilation at the success of his first efforts, and sure he could readily escape, Stetson hurried toward the little room occupied by Irene.

A blanket was hung before it to serve as a door, and this he cast aside without ceremony. Though she was reclining on the cot, she had not disrobed. Doubtless she was waiting for the coming of Maverick Bill.

Stetson caught her up in his strong arms, laid a hand across her lips to stifle her cries, and ran

with her toward the corral where the horses were in waiting, making no more of her weight than if she had been a feather.

Philip Sidney felt the cords give under the knife-stroke and realized that he was free, so far as his hands were concerned. As he lifted himself to a sitting posture, he saw the knife where it had dropped at his feet. He grasped it, intending to release himself and Old Connetty.

However, as he sawed through his bonds, filled with this good intention, he heard the smothered scream which Irene gave when Stetson invaded her apartment. It told Sidney that the girl was again in peril; and, with the hot impetuosity which was one of his failings, he rushed in the direction of the cry, leaving Old Lone Hand still bound and helpless.

A feeling that he was not doing right was upon him, and he told himself he would return in just a moment; but, when he saw Panhandle Ben dart away with the girl, he forgot this and leaped in pursuit. Thus the opportunity of returning was lost, for in less than a minute thereafter the outlaws were up and with arms in their hands.

Stetson was not to escape so easily as he had anticipated. The interruption to his scheme did not come, however, from Phil Sidney. As Stetson reached the horses with the frightened girl—Sidney being at the time in full chase and shouting loudly—there came a pounding of hoofs from without, and an inquiring call from Maverick Bill. The chief of the desperadoes had come at last.

Stetson uttered a bitter curse, as he heard Maverick's call, but he still strove to mount one of the horses. As he did so, Maverick, who knew that something was wrong, hurled down the corral gate and stood in the opening.

The fitful moonlight showed him the girl struggling in Stetson's arms. At the same moment, too, Irene released herself sufficiently to cry out.

The answer was a shot from Maverick's revolver, that spun perilously near Stetson's head.

Thus beset both in front and rear, Stetson let the girl slide to the ground, bent low in the saddle, and made a dash for the opening in the corral. So quick did he make this rush, that Maverick was bewildered and fired wildly. His aim was also frustrated by the cry which came from the girl as she dropped to the stony floor.

The men who had been with Maverick Bill on this last cattle-drive were hurrying their horses up the slope. They now turned in full chase of Panhandle Ben, when the latter burst through the opening and rushed away.

"After him!" Maverick yelled, furious with rage. "Ketch him! Shoot him! Lay to it, boys! Don't let him git away!"

He ran for his own horse; and, as soon as he could mount, rode swiftly in pursuit.

The outlaws who had been within the fortress had rushed out; and now, as they heard Maverick Bill's loud commands, they hurried to get their own horses, paying no heed to the girl, nor to Philip Sidney, and equally forgetful of Old Joe. Likely, if they noticed Sidney, they thought he was one of them.

In an almost inconceivably short space of time, they were racing across the prairie, guided by the retreating hoof-beats of Maverick and his men.

Sidney had seen the girl slip from the arms of Stetson, and as she did not arise, he ran toward her as soon as he could safely do so.

With the exception of these two, the corral was vacated. There were two or three horses still in it, and Sidney was not so crazy but that he noticed one of them was the phantom horse seen by Old Joe on the previous night.

He did not stop, though, to give it a second glance.

The girl was more scared than hurt, and she was scrambling to her feet as he drew near.

"You here?" was her excited question, when she recognized him. "You must not stay here a minute! You will be killed, if you are caught! Take that horse, that shining one over there, and leave at once! He is the fastest—and for other reasons I want you to take him."

Sidney looked at the horse in amazement. "You are not hurt?" he questioned. "Tell me your not hurt!"

"I'm not hurt at all! Take that horse and go! Go, while you can! It will soon be too late!"

"But I must return for Old Joe!" he declared, stung by his temporary forgetfulness.

"You cannot get back there!" she urged. "The guards never leave their posts. Go! Go while you can!"

In spite of this, Sidney ran back toward the opening, only to find that her words were correct. He was recognized and fired at by one

of the guards from the wall; and, when he still attempted to go on, he discovered that the way was blocked. One of the outlaws stood in the opening itself.

He hastened back to the corral, thinking he might be able to persuade the girl to release the old man.

"I cannot go without him!" he said. "I will stay here and die first! It's my fault that he's not with me now!"

She had felt sure he would return in a moment, and in the short interval of his absence had slipped a bridle on the horse selected.

"Don't fear for your friend!" was her assuring whisper. "I promise to look after him. But you must go. We must not be seen talking here. Go! Go!" and she pushed him toward the animal.

He heard the outlaw rushing down the incline in their direction, and he knew that he could do nothing else. So he slipped to the back of the horse, and gave it the rein. He could not help Old Joe, now, bitterly as he regretted his inability. If he stayed he would be retaken; and if he went, there would be a chance to return and assist the old man. There seemed nothing else to do; and she assured him he need have no fear for his friend's safety.

CHAPTER VI.

BORNE BY THE SPOOK STEED.

SIDNEY'S thoughts were not of the most reassuring character as he turned the horse's head toward the corral gate. The very fact that he was sitting astride of the queer animal whose incomprehensible actions had been witnessed by Old Joe did not tend to serenity of mind. Sidney had little of the superstition of the old borderman, and would not have acknowledged that he had any; but for all that he was possessed by a feeling of indefinable fear.

He remembered that Irene Romero had selected the animal, because he was fast, she said—and for another reason, which she did not put into words. What was that other reason? Was the horse likely to play him some trick? Surely, it could not vanish from beneath him and leave him sprawling on the prairie!—though Old Joe had said that he had seen it disappear, as if a lamp had been blown out. That was certainly an unaccountable thing.

He could feel its warm body beneath him, and the play of its muscles as it bounded forward. If it was not a real horse, it was enough like one. But, of course it was a real horse! Was he not at that moment gripping it with his legs, and was it not carrying him speedily away from all danger?

With the corral behind him and the open prairie before, Sidney began to breathe freer, and ventured to reach forward and stroke the horse's neck. The coat shone with that dull glow of which Old Joe had spoken, but it was unmistakably hair which Sidney's hand touched. There was apparently nothing on it—no phosphorus, or anything of the kind, to give it the light, and Sidney could only wonder amazedly at what he beheld.

His thoughts were not all for the horse. He was thinking also of Lone Hand and of Irene Romero. He relentlessly chided himself for his seeming abandonment of his friend. He had not meant to abandon him; and attempted to frame an excuse for what he had done. He would have released Old Joe, but for that cry from the girl. That had caused him to lose his head; and after occurrences had prevented his return. But he could scarcely make himself believe that time was not given him in which to cut Joe's bonds.

It was not pleasant to dwell on this, and he turned to the girl. Perhaps he did not at the time realize it, but he was already greatly enamored of her, and likely to become more so if given many opportunities of seeing her. He thought she was the handsomest woman he had ever beheld; and it delighted him to recall the gracefulness of her carriage, the queenly poise of her head, and the beauty of her expressive face. He had seen that she had a temper and will of her own, but that only caused him to admire her the more.

He recalled her promise to aid Old Joe. That must have been what her words meant. Perhaps she had already fulfilled this promise, and his old pard was even now at liberty? The hope was inspiring.

The train of thought was interrupted by the horse, which shied violently at some object. It was very like a horse to do that. Very like a real horse! But Sidney, now that his attention was again directed to the animal, was made aware that the singular phosphorescent glow had wholly disappeared! He could not under-

stand it, and looked at the animal beneath him with a thrill of fear.

Involuntarily the words of a song, just becoming popular at that time, crossed his mind: "Where was Moses when the light went out?"

Moses was on the back of the animal, without doubt; but he was not in a pleasant mental state. He was even inclined to throw himself from the strange creature and trust to his own legs for future safety.

Before he had time to form a theory, or a plan of action, he noticed that the glow was returning. It was very faint at first, but became brighter and brighter until the former dull yellowish cast was resumed.

This was as mysterious as the disappearance of the light, and Sidney's teeth fairly chattered as he witnessed it. He straightened himself with an effort, and became aware that his face and person were bathed in a profuse perspiration.

"Ugh!" and he shivered. "That makes me feel decidedly creepy. I wonder, now, what caused that?"

It was an unanswerable question.

Sidney had turned the animal in the direction of Good Cheer Ranch; and, as they were bowling along at an excellent gait, he did not throw himself from the horse's back. Whatever strange mystery surrounded it, it had carried him well so far; and he trusted it still further.

Once he thought he heard the clatter of hoofs behind him, some distance away, and drew rein a moment to listen. But the sounds had died out, and he went on again.

With the exception of what has been noted, nothing of a startling character was developed throughout the ride; and in due season he drew near the ranch buildings. It had been a long trip, and he had forced the horse to its best speed.

A number of the cowboys had just returned from an unsuccessful search for the cattle which had been gobbled by the rustlers—a search in which they had also spent much time in looking for their strangely-absent employer. They were gathered near one of the corrals, not having put away their horses, and were conversing with the other cowboys, who had likewise come in late and had not yet dismounted.

Sidney could see them, dimly-outlined, as they stood and sat there, but he could not see the startled looks with which they were viewing his advance. These men had heard of the spectral steed of Prairie Gibraltar, and some of them averred they had seen it.

As the glowing animal continued its approach—it being plainly visible, though the form of its rider seemed the merest outline of a man—the alarm of the cowboys increased. At length their superstition would permit them to face it no longer. With inarticulate cries they turned in flight—those who were dismounted scrambled wildly for the backs of their horses.

Sidney saw this movement, and at the same moment was made aware of its cause. But the knowledge came too late to stop the stampede. He shouted loudly to the men, trying to tell them who he was, and endeavoring to assure them that their fears were needless. His shouts and explanations only made the matter worse.

Their flight degenerated into a panic, in which terror was the controlling impulse. In vain Sidney shouted to them. They would not stop to hearken to his words.

Knowing the speed of the animal he rode, he dashed in pursuit, hoping to overtake some of them and make them understand that they were acting very silly. This chase increased their fright; and, plying quirt and spur, they urged their ponies into a headlong run.

Seeing he could do nothing, Sidney drew in with a sarcastic laugh, forgetting that only a short time before he had been almost as badly frightened and that his nerves had not wholly recovered their steadiness.

"The fools!" he exclaimed, turning again toward the ranch house. "They're running like wild jack-rabbits! If they had only stood their ground a minute, they would have learned the truth."

There was now not a cowboy on the place, and only a few ponies. He turned the horse into the corral and went into the house, not knowing what else to do. Some of the cowboys might return after a time; and, when he had explained to them how foolish had been their fright, he could send them to look up their comrades.

He was greatly vexed at what had occurred, for he had counted on the aid those men could render. His plans were all matured. He meant to take his men and rescue Old Connetty, if it was found he had not been released. Now, he could do nothing.

"The fools!" he again exclaimed, getting up and striding nervously across the room. "Their silliness may bring about Old Joe's death!"

CHAPTER VII.

"THE COMMITTEE OF ONE."

"WHY couldn't the boy hev cut me loose while he was at it?" Old Connetty grumbled, as he strained fruitlessly at his bonds, after Sidney leaped up and disappeared. "He goes plum wild after a bit of calico, that boy does; an' fergets the old friend that's stood by him this many a day."

There was something of bitterness in the words, showing that the old nomad was hurt by this abandonment. He had heard the scream of the girl, and knew that was why Sidney had sped so quickly away.

But he recalled this selfish thought as soon as he had expressed it; and, as the sounds from the outside revealed that a chase and pursuit was in progress, he sincerely wished that whatever else Sidney might be able to do, he might succeed in aiding Irene.

"I reckon she's hev'n' a tolerable hard row to hoe in this den o' serpents," Connetty commented, giving over his vain struggle, when he saw he could not free himself. "She needs a friend hyer o' the right stripe, but I calc'late she'll not find one in a hurry. Even that mis'able old dad o' hers whups her sometimes, the feller said. He wouldn't darst to do it, if Old Joe was around!"

He could gather little of what was happening outside, but that little gave him hope. A few words spoken to him from an excited desperado showed that some horseman had dashed out of the corral, and he thought it must refer to Sidney.

"Go it, boy!" was his exultant exclamation. "I'm with ye in spirit, if I hain't in body!"

All of the awakened outlaws had streamed from the interior after Ben and Sidney, leaving Old Lone Hand alone. Even the one guard was not then at the entrance, though he stationed himself there in a short time. The sentinels were on the walls, of course; for, as Irene had stated, it was strictly against orders for them to abandon their posts.

Joe strained again at his bonds in another desperate effort to release himself, but he only succeeded in cutting himself cruelly and painfully.

After a long time, as it seemed to him, he heard a light footstep at his side, and, staring up into the darkness, made out the form of Irene Romero.

"Hush!" she said, and her fingers were lifted, warningly. "I've come to give you your liberty. I promised him I would, but if we succeed, we must be very quiet."

"Then the boy got away?"

"Yes; but you mustn't ask me any questions. We may be overheard, if we talk. He got away on a good horse, and is far from here by now."

The words were the merest whispers.

Connetty expressed his satisfaction by a grunt of approval.

"I have prepared a horse for you," she whispered, kneeling down and cutting his bonds with a penknife. "He is in a bunch of willows just below the corral. I think you can find him without any trouble. I tied him there. He is saddled and bridled."

She was sawing at the cords as she spoke, and Old Joe gave another grunt of satisfaction as he felt them slip from his wrists.

"You're a blessed good girl!" was his hearty remark, though in a tone almost as low as hers, lifting one of his cramped hands and giving her bowed head a fatherly pat. "If ever I can help you, count on Old Joe! I'm powerful glad the boy got away! I 'low he'll go straight to the ranch and rustle out the cowboys."

"You must not let them attack this place!" she urged. "I forgot to make him promise that, before he went. I was almost too excited, then, to think. But you will not let them come here?"

"I'll whup the fust man that p'int's his nose this way, if you say fer me to!" his jubilation increasing, as he felt the cords give on his ankles.

"I want to try to get father to leave this place, but if these men should come to attack him, maybe he couldn't do that, you know. You understand?"

"I think I understand; and while I can't say that I admire your par, I'll recollect what you've said."

"He might be killed or captured, you know, and then he couldn't leave!" speaking eagerly and earnestly. "There, you're free. Don't forget where the horse is tied. I'll show you the way out. You can't go out the main way,

for there's a sentinel there. And tell him I'll never, never forget how he threw himself into danger to help me to-day."

The tones were tremulous and earnest. "Yes; I'll tell him," Old Lone Hand promised. "I'll recollect every word."

He staggered to his feet and stretched his cramped limbs.

"This way!" she whispered, leading him out of the place along a narrow passage. "We must make haste; and we must be very quiet. I don't know what father would do to me if he knew what I've done to-night."

The tunnel-like passage opened at last at an obscure point on the hillside—a point that was concealed from outward view.

She did not follow Connetty through the opening, but whispered after him:

"The river is just there, on your right. You'll find the horse in the willows only a few yards down the bank. You'd better lead him, until you get far enough away to mount safely."

The old man opened his lips to thank her, but saw that she had disappeared. He felt very queer, after all that had happened, and could hardly realize that he was a free man again, standing out there on the rocky slope beneath the cloudy sky.

He could hear the guards calling to each other from the walls, and this increased his caution as he made his way to the river. The horse was readily found; and, when he had led it some distance down the valley, he climbed into the saddle and rode silently away.

When certain he was beyond hearing of the people of Prairie Gibraltar, Lone Hand turned in the direction of Good Cheer Ranch, as Sidney had done before him. He was sure Sidney had gone there.

He did not know of the chase after Ben Stetson, made by Maverick Bill. Once he heard a far-away thunder of hoofs; but, as he could not tell the cause, and they did not seem to be coming toward him, he rode contentedly on. He and Sidney were out of the clutches of the cattle-thieves, a thing to be devoutly thankful for; and he did not choose to question the future.

When within a mile or two of Good Cheer Ranch, the old tramp was thrown almost into a panic by beholding the Spook Steed loom out of the darkness before him. It was riderless, and advancing at an easy canter. To meet it thus on the prairie, so far away from Prairie Gibraltar, was a thing inexplicable at the time.

He sat silent in the saddle with drawn rein, and watched it with breathless interest, as it cantered by only a hundred yards away. He turned in his seat, and let his gaze follow it until it was swallowed up in the gloom.

"That beats me!" he declared, drawing a deep sigh of relief.

Then he jogged on toward the Good Cheer.

He was given a greater surprise when the ranch was reached. Not a soul was there! Two or three ponies were grazing near the ranch buildings. That was all. And although he looked the place over, he could find neither Sidney nor the cowboys.

"Up a stump ag'in!" was his dubious avowal, as he stood in the doorway and took a reflective survey of the house. "I've been a-bumpin' ag'in' mysteries fer two days now, an' this is ekal to the biggest o' 'em!"

He entered and sat down in a chair, hoping by thought to find a solution to the problem. He could make nothing of it. Sidney had had abundant time to get there. Many things might have occurred, of course, to interrupt him and cause delay, but that could not explain the absence of the cowboys. He had been at the ranch many times, and this was the first time he had seen it completely deserted.

As he looked further, he saw all about him signs of unnatural confusion.

"They's somethin' wrong hyer! Somethin' monstrous wrong! The boy hain't come, ner I don't think he's a-goin' to; an' the cowboys hev been driv' off the place. Otherwise, they wouldn't hev left!"

"Matters seem mighty topsy-turvy; an' Old Joe Connetty, here an' now, app'int's himself a Committee o' One to go to the bottom o' things ginerally! If them cattle-thieves hev had a hand in this, I kin tell 'um that they won't be long in hearin' frum the committee! You bet! Lone Hand'll play his keards fer all they is wu'th ef it runs him inter Satan's kitchen."

CHAPTER VIII.

A DESPERATE FIGHT.

PHILIP SIDNEY'S vexation increased, rather than diminished, as the minutes slipped by without bringing the return of any of the cowboys.

He had removed the bridle from the phantom horse, and turned it into the corral. It shone oddly enough there, and he mentally likened it to a diamond in a setting of barbed wire.

Feeling somewhat hungry, he re-entered the house and ransacked the pantry for something to eat. While thus engaged, the door was violently thrown open, and a man showed himself in the opening, being clearly revealed by the lamp which Sidney had lighted.

It was Ben Stetson.

Stetson knew the house was occupied only by Sidney, for he had approached it carefully and made a survey through one of the small windows. He was still burning to be revenged on Sidney, and had followed him there for that purpose. What caused him to do so can be speedily made known.

The sounds of hoofs which Sidney fancied he heard while on the way from Prairie Gibraltar, were those of Stetson's horse. Stetson observed the Spook Steed heading toward Good Cheer Ranch, and leaped to the conclusion that Old Lone Hand had escaped and was astride of it. Sidney he thought he had finished with the knife-thrust. He was almost as anxious to punish Old Connetty as he had been to punish Sidney; and, feeling that he had thrown Maverick Bill off his trail, he followed the glowing horse at a safe distance.

Stetson was close enough to observe the effect of the horse on the cowboys, and had laughed quietly as he saw them speeding away so wildly. He did not approach the buildings, however, until certain the cowboys did not intend to return. Then, as already stated, he crawled up to one of the windows and beheld Sidney while the latter was ransacking the pantry.

This was a tremendous surprise to Stetson, and at the first glance he could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes. He could not doubt that he saw a living, breathing man before him, when he witnessed Sidney stowing away liberal quantities of eatables. No spirit would eat like that!

Stetson's rage gathered in force and volume as he stood at the window and knew without doubt that the man whom he thought he had slain was still in the land of the living; and he swore a great oath that he would yet accomplish his purpose.

Assuring himself again that the cowboys were not returning, he strode angrily to the door, hurled it open and leaped through into the room.

Sidney dropped the loaf of bread at which he was gnawing, when he beheld this apparition, and, with a motion that was almost instinctive, reacted for his revolver.

Before he could get it out, Stetson leaped on him, tore the weapon from its place, and hurled it across the room. His desire seemed to be to disarm Sidney, and then slay him at his pleasure. This was proven by the fact that he did not fire on Sidney from the window. He might easily have killed him from that point by a well-directed pistol-ball.

"Put down yer hands!" he growled, as Sidney threw up his arms to defend himself. "I hain't a-goin' to hit ye yit. When I git ready, though, I'll set my heel on your head as if 'twas the head of a snake, an' grind the life out o' ye!"

He had placed himself between Sidney and the revolver on the floor. There was no weapon within Sidney's reach, and nothing now on his person except the small knife in one of his pockets. Even the rude chairs with which the room was plentifully supplied were where he could not get at them.

Stetson believed he had his enemy "dead to rights," as he would have expressed it, and smiled sardonically.

"When you go out of this house, you'll be carried out, I reckon!" an evil sneer curling his lips. "I see you've been ridin' that phantom hoss. No luck ever comes to the man that does that. The thing's a-movin', ha'nted mystery, that brings misfortune to every one that meddles with it. I've seen it tried dozens of times, and never knowed it to fail yit. When you throwed your leg over the back of that brute, it meant you was a-goin' to ride to your death. It meant that you was to be killed; an' hyer I am to kill ye!"

The words were hissed savagely.

Stetson's eyes were blazing, his face set with the deepest hatred, and to give emphasis to his words he thumbed the keen edge of the knife he had drawn.

Philip Sidney was doing some rapid thinking; but even while he thought, he wondered vaguely if Irene Romero believed in the ill fate which, as Stetson claimed, attached to any one who

mounted the phantom horse. If she believed in that, and had thought to send him out to his death—he would not credit her with such base-ness, and cast the foul suggestion behind him.

"That hoss is bewitched," Stetson continued, watching the effect of his words. "It ain't a thing of this earth. Better fer a man to ride the broomstick of an old witch than to straddle that spook beast."

What puzzled Sidney more than anything else was that Stetson seemed to believe in the truth of his statements.

The desperado's manner was becoming more threatening at every moment, and, for lack of anything else with which to defend himself, Sidney felt for the clasp-knife in his pocket.

Stetson saw the movement, and, thinking a hidden pistol was about to be produced, leaped on Sidney with tigerish ferocity.

The combat that followed was terrible. As the men came together they locked in a bear-like hug; and, straining and tugging for the mastery, they reeled and staggered about the room, with labored breathing and blows that were constant, but ineffectual.

Sidney had succeeded in grasping Stetson's knife-hand, and now used his utmost endeavors to retain his hold on it, realizing that if the ruffian once broke that clasp a desperate and perhaps mortal thrust would immediately follow.

How the fight might have ended cannot be told, for it was brought to a sudden termination by an unexpected interruption. Maverick Bill and some of his men leaped through the open doorway, with loud and excited cries.

Stetson recognized the voice of his chief, even before he was aware of his presence. It seemed to portend his own doom. Hurling the young ranchman from him with herculean force he leaped for the nearest window, without stopping to count the number of the new-comers. The leap was followed by a crashing of glass, as Stetson went head-first through the sash, falling heavily to the ground outside. The shot which Maverick fired did not touch him; so he scrambled up in haste and made for one of the horses.

The horses of Maverick's men were standing close by the building, and to the back of one of these Stetson sprang. He gave a triumphant yell, as he sunk the rowels deep into the flanks of the startled animal, and turned its head toward the open prairie.

"Ketch me, if you can!"

With this taunting, backward fling, he cleared the circle of buildings and saw before him the way to liberty.

Philip Sidney could not have been more startled and bewildered, if the floor had suddenly and unaccountably given way beneath his feet, than he was by the coming of Maverick, and the termination of the fight.

In spite of his dazed condition he realized that the presence of these desperadoes could bode him no good. He had only exchanged one form of peril for another.

There was a rush from the room and a futile pursuit of Stetson by some of Maverick's followers, but Maverick and his principal men did not leave the room until they had secured and safely bound the young ranchman.

The runaway could not be captured; and, when this was ascertained, Sidney was borne from the house and lifted to one of the saddles.

He gave a glance toward the corral and started. The phantom horse was gone!

CHAPTER IX.

STETSON'S SCHEME.

THE confused condition of the room caused by the struggles which had occurred therein, was what told Old Joe Connetty that matters had gone wrong with Sidney.

The veteran borderman was a keen reader of signs, and set himself deliberately to interpret the correct meaning of what he saw. That there had been a fierce struggle could not be questioned. Its indications were abundant and unmistakable. But he was misled by the broken window and the imprint of Stetson's hands and knees in the soil beneath it. Joe thought he saw in these evidence that Sidney had been surprised and had made his escape by that way.

He found further confirmation in this belief when, with a lighted lantern, he searched the soil about the buildings. He found the trail made by Stetson's horse in leaving the place, and the hoof-prints of the horses that had been urged in pursuit. It seemed as plain as day to him that Sidney had leaped through the window, secured a horse, and fled.

He returned to the house and again critically inspected it. His imagination conjured up the entire scene, as he fancied it to have been. There was the broken loaf on the floor; and he pictured

Sidney sitting at the table, or preparing for himself a meal, and the interruption that followed. He did not doubt that the invaders of the ranch-house were Maverick Bill and his men; and he rejoiced in the thought that Sidney had escaped their clutches.

He took up the loaf and munched at it as he passed out of the room. His plans were made. He would follow the trail of Sidney's horse and see how the young man had fared. From the hoof-prints, he believed Maverick had abandoned his pursuit; but of this, he could not be absolutely certain. There were many returning hoof-prints, but all of the desperadoes might not have turned back. Some of them might have continued on.

He could determine that better further out on the prairie; and he hastened to place himself in a position to quiet his fears. If Sidney's trail continued on alone, he would know the chase had been given over. If other trails accompanied it, he would know that it had not.

Old Lone Hand breathed a deep sigh of relief when, less than a half-mile from the ranch buildings, he found the trail of a single horse continuing straight out into the prairie. It was the trail of Ben Stetson's horse, but the old man held to the delusion that it was Sidney's; and he moved cheerfully forward, dismounting and making an examination occasionally to make sure he was not straying from the right course.

He was puzzled to account for Sidney's going in that direction, but Sidney was master of his own movements, and might have many good and sufficient causes wholly unknown to Old Joe.

The night was now far advanced, and the old man was wearied and sleepy, having had no proper rest for a long time; but, in spite of this, he clung pertinaciously to the trail.

When daylight came, and the hoof-prints still continued onward in a straight line, Connetty began to be puzzled still more. In that direction there was no point which Sidney would be likely to seek.

"I reckon the young feller knows what he's a-doin'," he dubiously averred, "but hanged if it looks like it! He must hev got that excited at ever'thing that's happened, that he's gone plum crazy!"

In no other way could Joe adequately explain what he conceived to be Sidney's strange conduct.

The sun had barely risen when he descended into a bushy draw among sand-hills, and unexpectedly found himself in the presence of a number of dismounted horsemen. The horses were tethered, and the men seemed to be conversing over the morning meal. The trail of Sidney's supposed horse led straight to the group!

Lone Hank knew not whether to advance or wheel about. His indecision was observed by one of the men, who immediately stood out from among his fellows and shouted:

"It's all right, Lone Hand! Come right up and bear a hand with us. We're friends!"

The speaker was Stetson.

The old borderman thought he recognized him, but was not sure of it; and, when the invitation was repeated, he advanced toward the fire. He felt sure Sidney must be there, either as a free man or as a prisoner; and in either case, he desired to know it.

Although Connetty went forward somewhat suspiciously, he was not prepared for what happened. There were not as many men as he had at first thought—only three or four. They seemed inclined to friendliness, until he was in their presence. Then they seized him and dragged him from the saddle.

"What's the meanin' of this?" was his indignant question.

"We don't intend to hurt you," Ben Stetson assured. "But we wanted to make certain you wouldn't run away, an' we didn't care to give you a chance to use your weepers."

"I'd like a little talk with you," when the veteran had been relieved of his revolver. "You can sit down comfortable like on the sand there, an' we'll pretend we're old friends havin' a pleasant chat."

"What hev you done with the boy?" Joe demanded, glaring about.

Stetson laughed, the question and look explaining something that had hitherto puzzled him.

"So, that's why you follered my trail? You thought I was Phil Sidney? You was away off there; but I'm glad you've come. As I said, I want a talk with you."

"Where is Phil, then?" looking at the desperado with eyes that flamed.

"You'll have to ask somebody that knows. He was in his own house the last time I seen

him, havin' a lively tussle with Maverick Bill. If I was guessin', I'd say that Maverick gobbled him."

This was unwelcome information, and Old Lone Hand groaned.

"I'm glad you come," Stetson repeated. "I want to do up Maverick Bill, an' you're jist the feller to help me. Maverick chased me like a hound to-night, and would have killed me if he'd got his fingers on me."

"An' served ye right!" Old Joe fearlessly declared.

This was not pleasant and Stetson frowned.

"Better curb that temper a little, er we won't git on so well as I hoped. I've got you now, an' you won't git away unless you promise to do what I ask."

"You know where Fort Yucca is? About twenty miles from byer?"

The old nomad did not reply.

"I want you to go to Fort Yucca an' tell the commander that Ben Stetson, one of Maverick's men, stands ready to show him the way into Prairie Gibraltar. You hear that, do you? you old sinner! That's the way I propose to do up Maverick. Tell him if he'll see that I'm granted a free pardon for everything I've done, I'll show him how to git at Maverick Bill an' his men, an' help him to capture them."

"These three chaps," nodding toward his comrades, "used to belong to Maverick's band, same as I did. But they're out of it, now, an' out of it for good, same as I am. He must agree to grant them free pardon, likewise."

"Why don't you go yourself?" Joe questioned.

"I should, if I wasn't afraid to. The commander of the fort might hold me there, and that wouldn't be pleasant. If there wasn't something to keep me from going, do you suppose I'd try to argue you into doing it?"

"What am I ter hev fer this?"

"Your liberty," was Stetson's prompt reply. "Go to the post and tell the commander what I say; after that you can go where you please."

It was an excellent opportunity to get out of Stetson's clutches, and to continue the search for Phil Sidney. All through this conversation he had been thinking of Sidney constantly. If Stetson had spoken the truth, it was likely that Sidney was again in the power of Maverick Bill.

The old man gave himself up to a short period of thought. He had very little faith in the ability of the soldiers. His many years of isolation made him prefer to rely solely on his own energies in every emergency. He really believed that if the soldiers were sent after Maverick Bill's men, the result would be a bungling expedition, the escape of the thieves, and more than likely the death of the young ranchman. Therefore, there was a mental reservation, when he again looked at Ben Stetson, and said:

"I'll go!"

This was the promise Stetson sought; and when he had received it, he more fully elaborated the plans he wished conveyed to the commander; and a few minutes thereafter, Old Joe was seated on his own horse, making his way from the hated camp.

He kept straight on in the direction of Fort Yucca until he had placed more than a mile behind him, and was completely hidden from Stetson's men by the intervening sand-hills. Then he changed his course toward Good Cheer Ranch.

"I told him I'd go!" he muttered grimly. "But I didn't tell him *whur* I'd go to. He was thinkin' of Fort Yucca when I said it, an' I was thinkin' o' the young feller, an' there's whur the mix come in. I don't want none o' them sogers to come rampin' round, sp'ilin' everything. I'd ruther risk the Committee of One in a thing o' this kind! I would, by a good deal!"

CHAPTER X.

AT FORT YUCCA.

BEN STETSON'S anger was unmeasured when he found that Old Joe had deceived him. He did not know of this until the afternoon of the following day. About that time, his anxiety becoming great, he rode out to the sand-hills in the direction of Fort Yucca to watch for the coming of the troopers. He expected them before nightfall, and had planned to make an advance on Prairie Gibraltar with the coming of darkness. His suspicions becoming awakened by their non-appearance, he sought out the trail of Old Joe's horse, and discovered the deception which had been practiced on him.

More than twenty-four hours of what he considered valuable time had been lost. There was no chance of re-taking Old Connetty, and the only thing left for Stetson to do to bring about

the consummation of his wishes, was to visit the fort himself, or send one of his men.

He rode back to camp in a very irritated mood. Then, having thought the subject out, he announced his intention of going to the fort. He advised his men to remain where they were, or in the near vicinity, until they could hear from him; when, if he succeeded, they could come in and join the troopers in the march on Maverick Bill's stronghold.

Before morning he was in front of the gates of Fort Yucca; and after communicating his wishes to the sentry who halted him, was led before the post commander.

He found Colonel Thomas Tomlinson, a very fussy little officer—brave without doubt—but given to exaggerating trifles, and a most rigid disciplinarian.

The colonel was not pleased at being aroused at so early an hour to receive such a caller, and frowned on the intruder in the stiffest manner.

"What can I do for you?" he demanded, when Stetson had made an awkward salute and stood waiting before him. "You come on business of importance, I'm told."

Stetson assured him he had been informed correctly; and was about to plunge into his statement, when the officer halted him.

"I must have pen and paper to take down what you say."

He would not hear another word until these had been brought; and, in the interval, kept Stetson in nervous waiting, the outlaw not yet having been offered a chair.

"Now sit down there and let me hear your story!" dipping his pen in the inkstand and holding it poised. "Your name first, please. I have forgotten it. And don't plunge on so fast that I can't get down my notes!"

Even when kindest, the little man seemed so stern and severe that the big outlaw sunk into the chair, abashed, and did not venture to speak again until he had been once more commanded.

Slowly, and with many halts, to give Tomlinson a chance to keep up with him, Stetson told why he had come there, and what he desired done—laying special stress on his wish to secure a pardon for himself and companions for this betrayal of Maverick Bill.

"I don't see that we can do anything in this matter for a week, at least," the officer stated, looking up when he had made his last memorandum. "The troopers are pretty badly scattered."

"A week?" Stetson inquired, incredulously. "Might as well not move at all, if we wait that long. Maverick Bill could git a thousand miles from hyer by that time."

"Who is the commandant of this post?"

Stetson flushed under the reprimand and the keen glance given him.

"I don't mean ter criticise! But hang it all, colonel! if we have to lay around here that long, Maverick Bill will be 'most shore to slip through our fingers!"

"You particularly wish to catch him—aside from your desire to earn a pardon?" with another sharp glance.

"I'd like to kill him!" Stetson gritted. "He hain't served me right, colonel, and that's a fact! That's mainly why I come to you. I'd like to have a pardon, of course; but I'll be a heap sight better pleased when Maverick's safe in the clutches of the sogers, than I will be when I git ther paper sayin' I can go free."

"It will not be a pardon," the colonel officiously corrected. "Not a pardon, strictly speaking. It will be more like an agreement not to prosecute you in consideration of your estimable services."

Stetson felt that there was something akin to irony in this conclusion, and flushed a little; but he made no reply. He had no care for what the colonel might think of him, so long as his purpose was accomplished. But this probable delay of a week before anything could be done, immeasurably galled him. He feared the delay meant the total failure of the expedition against Prairie Gibraltar. However, he could not hasten matters by peevish complainings or anxious appeals.

He had already told the officer that Philip Sidney was probably held a prisoner by Maverick, and he thought it might be wise to recur to this.

"The young fellow that I told you about, who was gobbled by Maverick's men, may be killed if we have to wait a week before movin'."

So far as he was concerned, he cared nothing for the life or safety of Phil Sidney, but hoped a reference to the young man might have a hastening influence on the slow-moving colonel.

The colonel quietly put away his papers before replying.

"I shall send couriers to hurry the troopers in," he promised, "and just as soon as enough of them have arrived to make an advance seem safe, I will give my orders to that effect."

This was as much as Stetson could hope for; and, thanking Tomlinson profusely, he deemed it discreet to withdraw.

CHAPTER XI.

AN UNCANNY SIGHT.

"A PLAGUE on the sogers!" Old Lone Hand grumbled, as he continued on his way toward Sidney's Ranch. "They ain't no good. The main p'int is to git Phil out o' the hands o' the pack o' wolves up at Prairie Gibraltar, an' sogers wouldn't be wuth shucks fer that. If they done anything—which I'm doubtin'—they'd light in on the cattle-thieves, and there'd be a fight, an' likely the young chap'd be killed. That'd be the outcome uv it; an' I don't want nothin' like that to happen. I'd rather, a good deal, trust to myself. This is a case in which one's comp'ny, an' more's a great big crowd! I 'low the Committee o' One is enough to tackle this hyer business!"

In spite of the fact that he had scarcely dared hope to find Sidney at the Good Cheer Ranch, he was noticeably disappointed on approaching it to see that it was still silent and deserted. None of the cowboys had returned, a thing utterly incomprehensible to the old man.

He vented his spleen by denominating them a set of recreant renegades, and, having given the place a thorough examination, turned his tired horse into the corral, determined to give it and himself a long-needed rest.

He gave the animal a supply of grain, and then went into the ranch-house. He found plenty to eat in the pantry; and when he had satisfied his cravings in that line, he rolled into one of the cots for a few winks of sleep.

It was almost sundown when he awoke, and darkness was settling over the face of the earth when he turned once more toward Prairie Gibraltar.

The continued absence of the cowboys irritated him, but his ravings could not bring them back, nor explain the cause of their remaining away; and so he tried to divest his mind of all thoughts on the subject and to concentrate it on the work that lay ahead.

Much as he hated Ben Stetson, he was thankful for the information that individual had given him. If Stetson had not lied, Philip Sidney was very probably again behind the walls of Prairie Gibraltar; and if Sidney were there, Old Joe resolved to rescue him.

He purposely made his approach on the outlaw stronghold after nightfall to prevent all chance of discovery. The sentinels would be more alert and keener of eye than ever, and Old Joe could afford to take no risks.

The prairie was mantled in deepest gloom, as he drew near the place. As on his previous visits, he picketed his horse some distance up the valley, and made his way toward the rocky walls on foot. Everything about the massive pile was silent. The unceasing wind whistled through the grass and waved the tops of the willows and the few stunted trees.

Connetty moved with extreme caution, as he made his way toward the corral. He was greatly surprised when he found it empty. The absence of the horses appeared to indicate that the outlaws had taken their departure.

A heavy fear settled on the heart of the old borderman. Where had they gone? Had they taken Sidney with them? Was the young man yet alive?

These were the questions that distressed him.

"If harm's come to that boy, I'll hunt Maverick Bill to the ends o' the earth!" and he set his teeth hard, as he made this threat.

He felt toward Phil Sidney almost as if the latter were his own son. He could hardly have loved him more if such had been the case. They had long been intimate, and there was something in Sidney's character that appealed irresistibly to him. In this time of trouble he forgot Sidney's faults and weaknesses—forgot the young man's headstrong heedlessness, and the capricious impulses that frequently controlled him.

"Maverick Bill'll wish he'd never set eyes on that boy!" again peering into the gloomy corral to make sure he had not overlooked the horses.

He was depending more on ear than on eye in this investigation, knowing that if any horses were there, they must surely betray their presence by sounds.

From the corral Old Lone Hand crawled stealthily toward the walls of the stronghold itself. After a long interval, in which his keen

hearing was given full play without anything being discovered by it, he climbed over the corral inclosure and moved toward the opening which he knew to be there.

He recalled the other opening to which he had been piloted by Irene Romero, but that was at the other side of the stronghold and could not easily be visited until later.

If the present silence was maintained, going to show that the place was vacated, he purposed to make his way into the interior. He well understood the dangers that might attend such an attempt. The silence might not indicate a desertion of the place, but rather the fact that his approach had been discovered and a trap set for him.

"I can't afford to let Maverick set his claws on me, now," he whispered, as he thought of this. "If he should, somebody'd hev to help me, 'stead o' me bein' able to help the boy."

It was this consideration that made him so careful in all his movements. Not a pebble was suffered to turn beneath his feet; not a rock was allowed to brush against his clothing; not a stick was permitted to crackle under his tread.

As he neared the opening—which he could not see because of the darkness—he fancied he heard a slight sound. He could not tell from whence it came, but it caused him to look about.

He beheld a sight that startled him, while at the same time it almost froze the blood in his veins. There again was the Spook Steed, gliding ghost-like up the steep wall of the canyon! He had seen that before, and had there been no more than that, he could have viewed it with comparative equanimity. But, seated on the back of the horse was Philip Sidney, and on Sidney's face was an unmistakable look of fear.

Joe sunk down, shivering, thrilled through and through with an indefinable apprehension. The horse and its rider had about them an unreal look.

The appearance of fear on the young man's face made Old Joe groan in spirit. He could not believe he saw before him a real horse and a real rider, nor could he account for what he did see. There was an impression on him that the singular vision was a portent of evil.

Slowly the horse and horseman slipped up the wall of rock! There was no word from the rider, no sound of footfall from the steed.

"It gits me!" the veteran confessed, his eyes glued to the precipice. "I reckon, now, that can't be Phil's spirit. If I believed in spirits, I'd think 'twas. There's somethin' about that fiery boss that I never could understand. An' now it 'pears the boy has gone into a sim'lar line!"

He scarcely breathed as he gazed at it. Only at that one point was the rocky wall visible. On either side lay chasms of darkness. It was as if the shining coat of the Spook Steed had illuminated the Stygian space about it.

Even as Old Joe stared and wondered, the Spectral Steed and stranger rider disappeared—vanishing over the top of the bluff, as he had seen the phantom horse vanish once before; and as the twain were swallowed up in the darkness, the lone spy cried aloud in his agony.

CHAPTER XII.

IRENE'S APPEAL.

It was a full minute before Joe recovered, even in a measure, from the shock. Then, he was strangely shaken and nervous.

"If that thing comes ag'in, I'll take a shot at it!" he gritted, tremulously drawing out his revolver.

He had shot at the Specter Horse before, as it ascended the rocky wall, and had beheld his bullet smash against the granite. He could not expect a different result to attend a second effort. Nevertheless, he resolved to fire at it, if it appeared again.

"I don't know what to think of that air," he dubiously asserted, staring at the place where the vision had faded out. "It beats my time! An' to think that Sid wus a-ridin' uv the thing!"

That was what puzzled and distressed him.

He began to wish, now, that he had called out to the shadowy rider, though he could not make himself believe he would have received a reply. What he had seen looked like Sid, but surely it was not Sid!

"If I thought the boy wus playin' me a trick, I'd hev a settlement with him the fu'st time—"

The threatening sentence was not finished. The thought recalled him to the fact that he was searching for the young ranchman and knew not where to look for him; and again Old Joe groaned in anguish.

He started, as a light step sounded beside him, and a light hand was laid on his shoulder.

It will be remembered that he was not far from the opening which led from the corral into the interior of the stronghold.

Connetty uttered a startled exclamation and stared upward; and then he saw the dimly outlined form of Irene Romero.

"Wh-what in thunder—"

"Hush!" she warned, stooping toward him.

"We must not be heard talking here."

"Wh-where did you come from?"

He could not resist the question.

"From within the fort, of course! Where else should I come from? I knew you were out here, and I slipped out to warn you to leave. You will go, will you not, before trouble comes to you?"

There was something very soothing in her voice and touch. It brought to him an unusual quiet and peace. He leaned back passively, desiring her to go on, for he liked to listen to the music of her tones.

"If I could git you to talk to me all the time, I don't think I'd be in a hurry to go," was his grave statement.

"I don't think I ought to talk to you long. It might bring peril to both of us."

"You make me think uv my own girl," he continued, with uncommon tenderness. "She that's been dead an' gone these many years. I used to love to set an' listen to her by the hour."

He sighed deeply, as old memories flocked to him.

"You will go, will you not?" she urged.

"Whur's Phil Sidney?" he abruptly questioned.

She drew back as if to evince surprise.

"I supposed he was with you. Is he not?"

"If he wus, d'ye think we'd be bangin' round this bald hornets' nest? Not by a jugful! It's my p'inted opinion that he's inside of this hyer Prairie Gibraltar this blessed minute. That's why I come hyer, an' I ain't a-goin' to take the back track tell I know somethin' about him. If you're anxious to hev me leave these premises, you kin see by that what'll be the quickest way to git Old Lone Hand on the move."

She laughed, queerly.

"Did you not see him go up there?" she asked, pointing toward the cliff. "Follow him and you will be safe. If you stay here, you will be killed!"

Old Joe could not fail to note that this was contradictory of her former statement.

"Then, you seen that?" he anxiously demanded.

"I saw Phil Sidney, as you call him, and a shining horse go over that wall. They must be far from here, now. You will be wise to follow them."

It did not strike Joe as being so very strange that he should thus be conversing with this girl at the very entrance to her father's stronghold. He was accustomed to strange things, and the girl had shown him her good-will by releasing him from Maverick's clutches. That was sufficient proof that her intentions were friendly, whatever he might think of the oddity of her words.

"I ain't a-goin' on no wild-goose chase after ghosts," he doggedly asserted. "That wusn't Phil Sidney, if it did look like him. I don't know what it wus, but I know it wusn't him. An' I hev my doubts about the boss. A boss couldn't climb a cliff like that!"

Again was heard her musical laughter.

"Some horses might. You haven't seen all there are in the world."

Her voice deepened into seriousness.

"Will you not go? Let me urge you, for your own sake."

"Not tell I know more about Phil Sidney."

"He is not here," she averred. "I don't know where he is, but he is not here."

Here was another change of front.

"You're as fickle as the wind," was his dry observation. "One minute you know all about him, and the next you don't know nothin'. I'm 'most afeard I can, trust you!"

She had now wholly dropped her bantering manner.

"I know that you came here to search for him; and when I saw you out here awhile—"

"How did you happen to be lookin' fer me?" he interrupted.

"That does not matter. I saw you here, and knew the danger you would get in if you remained. I ran a great risk in coming to you. I released you before, but should you be taken now, I might not be able to do it. Father is not in a pleasant temper to-night."

"Then he is in there?"

"Yes, he and two of his men. All the others have gone away. But father and those two could easily overpower and kill you. I'm afraid they will do it, too, if they find you here. Oh, please go away! Go away at once!"

Her pleading was almost irresistible.

"But the young man?" Connetty persisted.

"I will make you a promise," she declared, in a whisper that was lower than ever. "You must believe it when I make it; and you must go away! If Philip Sidney does come here—if he should fall into my father's hands—I will see that he is not hurt. Does that satisfy you?"

"I'll go," Old Joe made answer, feeling his determination oozing from him under her continued entreaties. "I'll go, but I won't say that I'll not come back, should such a thing seem to become necessary."

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!" and her joy was pronounced and apparent. "I will keep my word. I will see that no harm comes to him."

She stepped from him as if to emphasize the need of haste, while Joe reluctantly arose to go.

"I said I'd come ag'in, if I thought I ought to," turning on her. "That's what I said."

She did not reply, but waved him away with her hand; and Old Joe leaped the corral barrier to the slope that led down to the river.

CHAPTER XIII.

A WOMAN'S SURVEILLANCE.

It was Old Lone Hand's intention to leave the place when he sprung over the wall, so strong an effect did Irene's entreaties have on him. He halted, however, instead of continuing on down the slope, and stood for a time in deepest reflection.

"That girl witched me," he declared, as he made a mental inventory of her statements. "She made me think so much of the girl that I lost, that I plum fergot myself while listenin' to her."

Old Joe Connetty's daughter had been slain by Indians, some years since, and he had never ceased to mourn for her. Thoughts of her followed him by day, and she visited him in his nightly dreams. She somewhat resembled Irene, though the resemblance was not close. She was much younger than Irene; and he believed if she had lived until now, the resemblance would have been very marked.

He sighed deeply, as he thought of the fair face and form he was never again to see.

"I wonder, now, if she could hev been a-fool-in' me?" his thoughts drifting to Irene. "I don't know why she'd want to do it. A woman has curious reasons sometimes, though—so curious that I often think they don't understand them themselves."

He was growing dissatisfied with Irene's conduct and with his promise to leave the place. He could not rid himself, either, of the vision he had seen on the wall of the precipice.

If he abandoned his search at that point, whither should he go? The words of Ben Stetson had made him think Sidney was a prisoner in the power of Maverick Bill. The last time Stetson saw Sidney, the latter was engaged in a conflict with Maverick, and Maverick's men were within and all about the house. From this it seemed plain that Sidney had been killed or taken captive by them.

Connetty had argued all this out long before, but he now went over it again, in his desire to determine the best course to pursue.

If he left there, whither should he go? He could not answer the question. Neither could he remain in idleness.

"I jist ain't a-goin'!" he savagely declared, facing about.

The suspicion had come strongly upon him that for some unknown reason the girl had deceived him.

"I'm a-goin' to see the inside o' this! Prairie Gibraltar, if they's any way o' doin' it."

With this he walked again toward the corral. Irene Romero was not a dozen feet from him when he made this change of front, although Old Joe never dreamed of such a thing. With steps as light as thistle-down she had followed him to make sure he meant to obey. She had feared he would not.

With what longing anxiety she had watched him, as he stood in the gloom debating with himself. She could see only the dimmest outline of his form, and could hear now and then only an indistinguishable muttering; but she guessed pretty accurately what this delay meant, and was in a fever of nervous dread lest he should fail to go on.

It was apparent she had great cause for wishing him to leave the place; and when she knew he did not intend to, she grew intensely angry.

She followed him again, as he moved toward the corral, and was only a few yards distant when he once more climbed the rocky barrier.

"He is not going to leave!" and she sunk her nails into her palms, at the thought. "He must not go inside! He must not! Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?"

She crept close to the wall of the corral and peered after him. She could not see him, but she could hear his light footsteps. Apparently he was making a survey of the corral instead of going toward the opening.

This was what Old Lone Hand was doing! He meant to approach the opening by and by, but did not desire to leave any unexplored places behind him. He had already gone over most of the corral, but he wished to examine it again. He had no knowledge nor thought of the girl's surveillance.

He had scarcely commenced his search, when there was another startling occurrence. Almost without warning, the Specter Steed seemed to rise out of the ground at the further end of the inclosure! It was riderless, now, but some one was leading it; and when it drew nearer to him, he saw that this some one was Irene Romero! Then he knew that the horse had been in hiding, and that she had brought it forth for some cause yet to be ascertained.

He was almost angry when he recognized her, which he did not do until she was very close; but this anger was overmastered by the fear with which he viewed the animal.

Irene came straight toward Old Joe, as if knowing he was there; and that she did know it was quickly made plain to him.

He started to leap backward in the direction of the wall, when she stopped him with a word.

"I've come to ask you to go again," dragging the strange horse forward by its bridle. "I want you to go, and I want you to take this horse."

"I won't do it, little one!" and Old Joe fairly shivered as he vociferated this.

"There's no harm about it," she said. "See!" stroking its neck gently.

"I don't want nothin' to do with it!" Old Joe asserted, again backing away. "A hoss that looks that way, an' kin climb cliffs, an' carry on as I've seen that critter do, would be shore to kill me before I'd rid it a mile. No; I hain't a-hankerin'! I've got a good enough hoss fer me back in the river willers!"

"But I want you to ride this," she urged, in her coaxing way. "It won't hurt you. You can come up and examine it, and see that it's nothing but a horse."

Old Joe stared at the beast, but positively refused to budge.

"Come and examine it. Put your hand on it, and see if it isn't just as I tell you."

Its coat was covered with that singular phosphorescent glow which had so puzzled the old man.

"Why do you want me to ride that thing?" was his earnest query.

He was wondering if there was not some trick in this request—some diabolical invention to injure or slay him.

"I will tell you," leaning forward and whispering the words. "If this horse is gone, father cannot use it any more for his evil purposes, and that may bring an end to his cattle-raiding. Will you not take it, please? Take it, and never let it be brought back here!"

Connetty stoutly shook his head.

"Little one, I wouldn't straddle that hoss fer worlds! Besides, I'm not anxious to leave my present stampin'-ground."

"Philip Sidney rode it," she coaxed.

This was news to Joe, and brought afresh to his mind the glimpse he had of the phantom horse while journeying toward Good Cheer Ranch.

"When was that?" he asked.

"The night he escaped, and the night I released you."

"That accounts fer the present mix-up," was his firm declaration. "Phil Sidney rode away that hoss, an' whur is he now? If I was called on to believe my eyes, I'd say he was a spirit, an' that I'd seen him this very night. No; thank! I'd rather trust to Shanks's ponies fer the rest o' my nateral born days!"

"Is he your boy, that you think so much of him?" bending on him an earnest look.

"Not bone o' my bone an' flesh o' my flesh, little one; but I couldn't think more uv him if he wuz. Thinkin' so much uv him is what brought me hyer to-night, an' the same thing's what made me break my promise to you. I've set out to find him, an' I'm a-goin' to do it if he's on top uv ground."

He fancied she shivered a little, as she caught these strongly-worded sentences.

"Please take the horse and leave!" she whispered again. "Every moment you stay here you're in the greatest danger! I'm honest in telling you that; I really am. Won't you take the horse and go?"

He felt the spell of her pleading tones, but nevertheless clung to his determination.

"I can't go," he asserted, almost fiercely, "tell I know what's become o' the boy. I won't go! If you know anything about him, tell me uv it."

What answer she would have made may never be known. There was a rush of men from the interior leading into the stronghold, and before Old Connetty could defend himself or fly, he found that such efforts would be useless. Still, it was not in his nature to be taken without a struggle. He could not see who the men were, nor their number, but supposed them to be Maverick Bill and the two outlaws who, Irene stated, were in the stronghold.

He struck out viciously as they rushed upon him, and succeeded in felling one to the ground; but before he could do more, he was seized by the others and his arms pinioned.

When he had time to look about him again, he saw the phantom horse standing near, but Irene was nowhere visible. Doubtless when the onset was made she had hurried to her apartment to escape the anger of her father.

"You've got me ag'in!" the veteran gritted, facing the leader with a resolute front. "And now that you've got me, I reckon you'll keep yer grippers on me better'n you did before."

The words seemed to anger Maverick Bill.

"You'll not git away again," he threatened, "an' you wouldn't have got away then if it hadn't been for that wild girl o' mine. I'm afraid I'll have to put handcuffs on her, if I expect to hold you, for you an' Phil Sidney do have sich winnin' ways. Women 'pear to fall in love with both of you at sight."

There was a sardonic grimace about this that made it far from pleasant.

Old Joe did not fail to observe that in Maverick's words there was a suggestion that Philip Sidney was a prisoner in the outlaw's hands.

"Hev you got Phil Sidney with you?" he queried, forgetful of his own danger.

"You'll find out soon enough whether we have or not."

This and a kick was the only satisfaction he got, as he was pushed toward the opening leading into the interior.

The old man was almost wild with disappointment. He felt sure he should soon see Sidney. But alas! he would be a prisoner even as Sidney was, and could do nothing to aid him.

CHAPTER XIV.

A LOVE SICK YOUTH.

"WHY Joel You here?"

This was Philip Sidney's greeting to the old ranger when the latter was conducted into the stronghold, and the two were brought face to face. The words were filled with pain.

Thus it was revealed to Joe that Irene Romero had deliberately deceived him!

When Philip Sidney was captured by Maverick Bill's men at the Good Cheer Ranch, he was re-conveyed to Prairie Gibraltar. Maverick hesitated to slay the young man; Sidney's life was spared. The outlaw chief may have been influenced to this by the pleadings with which Irene had overwhelmed him, when on a previous occasion, captives had been taken. There was no knowing, however. Other considerations may have swayed him altogether.

Phil Sidney was thankful that his life was spared, though to be again Maverick's prisoner was not pleasant. But, there was one drop of sweetness in this cup of gall. At Prairie Gibraltar he would be able to again see the girl who had so won on his fancy! He could endure much for that opportunity.

Irene's duplicity, while it puzzled the old man, is of easy explanation. The key to it lay in her love for her father's young captive. She wished to keep Philip Sidney at Prairie Gibraltar, and feared she might not be able to do this if she could not induce Old Joe to abandon his search. She did not desire that Sidney should be kept there continually, but hoped to escape some time in his company, and with him forever leave the place. This should be when she had learned that her love was reciprocated, and after he had promised to make her his wife.

She had dwelt on this so much—had so set her heart on it that she was angry with Old Joe for his attempted interference. Her untaught nature did not conceive it to be wrong to thus try to accomplish her ends. She intensely desired that Old Joe should leave, and if he could

be made to go by a falsehood, she saw no harm in uttering it. So many offenses of deeper dye were daily committed about her, that it is not to be wondered at she should so lightly regard this act.

Among Joe's first questions was one concerning Irene. But he spoke almost at the same time of the Specter Horse, and of the vision seen on the canyon wall.

"I think I can explain about the horse, but I am just now more anxious to talk about Irene," was Sidney's answer.

The young ranchman's mind seemed set wholly on her, and it gave him no pleasure to speak or think of anything else; and he forthwith proceeded to rave over her in a manner that was not pleasant to Old Joe.

"I know she's purty, an' has got a voice like a medder lark," the old nomad confessed, after listening to one of Sidney's rapturous outbursts. "But purty is as purty does. I don't like the way she tried to throw me off the trail to-night. I can't believe that that wuz jist a square deal. She said you wusn't hyer, when she knowed better."

"You must make allowance for her training," Sidney urged.

He had been trying to give some thought to the reasons which must have actuated her, and it pleased him to think that a desire to retain him with her was among her inspiring motives. It was a flattering fancy.

"What's botherin' me is, how we're goin' to git out o' hyer," Old Joe observed, endeavoring to turn the conversation.

"Don't you think she will help us, as she did before?"

Old Joe sighed disconsolately.

"It's 'she,' 'she,' all the time! My boy, I'm afeard you've tumbled head-over-heels in love. If you hev, you'll find yourself wadin' in sorrier up to yer neck. I'm a-speakin' by the book, I am. I've had experience in love an' matrimony, 'mong my other accomplishments."

"I am in love," was Sidney's honest avowal. "I'm not ashamed to confess it. I couldn't help being, after I'd seen her. Do you know, old pard, I don't know whether I want to leave here or not? If it wasn't for these bonds, I really think I'd like to stay."

Old Joe turned from him with a groan; and as he did so, beheld Maverick Bill walking toward them.

There was a fire burning in the center of the large apartment, and by its light Maverick was visible.

"You came alone hyer to-night?" he questioned, looking sternly at the old man.

"What if I did, an' what if I didn't?"

The presence of any of the outlaws always irritated Old Joe.

"It may mean a good deal to you. If you brought any men with you, we might take it into our heads that the safest thing to do would be to put you two out of the way. I think you was alone, though, for no other men have been seen."

Maverick Bill did not desire the death of these prisoners. He was bloody-minded enough on occasion, but he was sufficiently sensible to realize that deliberate murder of this kind might make it go hard with him, should he ever be captured by the authorities. He was sorry Old Joe and Sidney had ever come there. He did not wish to kill them, and yet, the knowledge they possessed made it unsafe to release them. That was one reason why he had brought Sidney back from Good Cheer Ranch.

"I don't know what I'm to do with you two," gazing earnestly at them.

"You might cut off these strings an' let us go," Old Joe suggested.

"An' have you bring the troopers down on to us! No, thankee! If I could trust you, I might do it. But I couldn't trust you."

"If we'd promise?" Old Joe asked. "I'll tell you what it is, Maverick, I jist come hyer to git this boy out uv his diffikilty. If you'll let us go, we'll not say a word about what we've seen at Prairie Gibraltar."

Maverick Bill shook his head.

"I couldn't do it," he declared; then turned and walked away.

"I'm glad he wasn't asking me to do the promising," Sidney whispered, as he listened to the outlaw's retreating footsteps. "I don't think I'd agree not to come back, as long as he keeps Irene here."

"You're a fool!" Old Joe blurted, in momentary disgust. "I reckon, now, you wouldn't hev gone if he'd a' cut you loose an' told you to?"

"You mustn't ask me hard questions, Joe," laughing a little at his companion's temporary

anger. "I'd go in a minute, if Irene could go with me; and likely I'd go without her. I don't say that I wouldn't."

"But you thought it jist the same!"

With this thrust Old Joe turned from him and would say no more.

CHAPTER XV.

STARTLING NEWS.

FROM his brief interview with Old Joe Connetty and Sidney, Maverick Bill went to the apartment occupied by Irene.

A lamp was burning in a rocky niche of her room, and by its faint light he saw she had been crying.

"What's this about?" he demanded roughly.

He was not always kind to Irene, and this evening was extremely ill-tempered. He had seen her talking with Old Joe in the corral, and had discovered the bridle on the horse she had brought forth.

"You have been working against me ag'in!" when she did not reply to his question. "I won't have that, Irene, an' you're old enough to know it. If we're to git along well together you mustn't try to mix in my business. I ought to know what's best for us better than you do, an' I say I won't have it!"

She turned on him with blazing glance, but checked the hot words she was about to utter.

"I've been watching you purty close, Irene, an' I've had the men watchin' you, an' I don't like the way you've acted lately. You helped that young man git away, an' I think you let Old Lone Hand loose, too. But you can't play that trick ag'in. If you try it, you'll be seen."

There was something very threatening in all this, the manner being even more threatening than the words.

"I don't intend to let him go!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, you don't! That's because you know you can't. What was you doing out in the corral? What was you talkin' to the old ranger about?"

She set her lips and refused to make answer.

"I think I know very well. You was plannin' to smuggle the young man out there, so that the old tramp could help him in gitting away. That's the trick you was up to, Irene! An' I shouldn't wonder if you sent for the old chap for that very purpose."

Irene smiled bitterly and scornfully. Her father was hitting wide of the mark.

"Wasn't that what you was driving at?"

"I sha'n't tell you what I was driving at!"

"You meant to let the young feller loose an' show him the way out there?"

"You're mistaken, father; I didn't; I didn't intend to do anything of the kind!"

"Mebbe you think you can fool me, Irene; but you can't. My eyes are toler'ble keen. You're in love with that young chap!"

She gave him a swift, odd look.

"What if I am?"

"It might mean a good many things. For one thing, it would mean that I couldn't trust you to be true to me while he's around. You can see it would mean that."

"But if I don't want him to go, father? What then?"

He stared at her in astonishment.

"I don't really want him to go!" she avowed.

"I don't think I could live if he should go!" She appeared to have no hesitancy in making this confession.

Maverick Bill was evidently puzzled.

"You don't want him to go? Do you think he would stay with us and join our band? If you do, you're a fool!"

"No! No! Not that!" putting out her hands as if to ward away the hideous suggestion. "I shouldn't want him to become—a—"

"A cattle-thief!" sneeringly.

Her face flamed.

"Oh, I don't know what I do want! I don't want him to leave here, and I don't want him to join the band!"

Maverick Bill got up and strode angrily across the narrow room.

"It seems to me you've got the least sense, Irene, of any woman I ever saw. Why should you go and fall in love with that puppy? He's one of your father's deadliest enemies. One of your deadliest enemies. Nothin' would please him better than to be able to destroy all of us. If that ain't his wish, why should he an' that old pard of his come foolin' round hyer?"

A sob told him she was crying again.

"What do you want me to do, Irene?" facing her fiercely. "Shall I let them go an' bring these devils of ranchmen an' cowboys down on us?"

"I tell you I don't want him to go!" was her hysterical assertion.

"I suppose you want me to send for a priest an' have you married to him right away!"

The mocking tone aroused her to open rebellion.

"I won't have you speak to me in that way!"

She leaped up, and her eyes had as fierce a light as he had ever beheld there, accustomed as he was to her passionate outbursts.

"I suppose love makes a fool of every one!"

"You sha'n't speak to me that way!" and she stamped her foot, wrathfully. "I'll scratch your eyes out, if you do! I'll—I'll kill myself!"

He gazed at her bewilderedly.

"This is a sweet critter!" pursing his lips and stepping backward to avoid a half-expected onslaught. "A reg'lar lunatic on the subject of love!"

A look of hate swept over her face, but she did not stir.

"If you'll only tell me what you want me to do, Irene!" he pleaded. "You r'ile me up like a catamount!"

"Oh, I don't want you to do anything!" and she sunk back into her chair with a revulsion of disgust. "You can't do anything, and I don't want you to do anything! I don't want you to try to do anything! I don't want you to bother me!"

"See hyer, Irene!" settling again into his own chair. "I think you an' me had better have a sensible talk;—if we can."

"If we can! That's well put! I don't think you could talk sensible, father, if you'd try a week!"

This did not augur a pacific conclusion to the interview.

"Your interests are my interests, or ought to be," he declared, striving not to notice her rasping tones. "I ought to be nearer to you than this stranger—this young man you never saw until a short time ago. How do you know that he cares anything for you? In my opinion, you're wastin' your time thinkin' about him."

She had more than once feared that this might be true.

"You oughtn't to side with him ag'inst me," seeing with pleasure that he was making some headway. "It ain't natural, an' it ain't right. If he was in love with you, it might be different; but I'm certain he ain't!"

"Don't say that!" she implored. "You'll kill me if you say that!"

"It's the truth, Irene, and you ought to see it. How could he, when you're so much of a stranger to him? No doubt he's got a sweetheart somewhere, and he's worryin' at this minute because he can't git back to her."

A hot flush leaped into her cheeks, and an ominous light shone in her eyes.

"You'll tempt me to kill him myself, father! You mustn't talk to me that way! You don't know what a crazy girl I am sometimes!"

He laughed disagreeably.

"If you should kill him, I reckon it'd save me the trouble. I low that's what I'll have to do, sooner or later. I can't think it would be safe to let 'em go."

"Leave me alone! Leave me alone!" she implored. "I must have time to think!"

She covered her face with her hands, and cowered in a disconsolate heap.

He stared at her for a moment, tugging furiously at his heavy mustache. He could not understand her moods. She seemed a child of the wind, as fickle and changeable.

"All right!" he said, and he got up and left the room, thinking it best to let her indulge in some serious thought.

He was aware of a great hurry and bustle, as he stepped into the large apartment, and it was soon made known to him that an absent member of the band had returned, bringing important news.

"What is it?" Maverick inquired, advancing on the new-comer. "What's up, now?"

The message was not of a quieting character. It was to the effect that Ben Stetson had formed a combination with the troopers at Fort Yucca, and that the latter were to march at once on Prairie Gibraltar.

"When did you learn of this?" he asked of the messenger.

"Only yisterday evening, an' I've about rid my horse to death gittin' the news to you."

"An' when were the troopers to move?"

"Jist as soon as they could. Last night, if they could git ready. They thought they couldn't move at onc't, but them that wuz away come in unexpected."

Maverick Bill swore a great oath against Stetson for this act of treachery.

"They may be on the way, now, then?" he inquired.

"That's what I calc'lated. An' if they air, they won't be many hours behind me."

The information was so important that a council was immediately summoned to consider it, and determine on a line of action. One of two things must be done: They must seek safety in flight, or prepare to defend Prairie Gibraltar against a greatly superior force. Heretofore they had had little fear of the soldiers at Fort Yucca; but with Ben Stetson to lead the latter, and show them the way into the stronghold, affairs took on quite a different phase.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DECLARATION OF LOVE.

OLD LONE HAND and Sidney had been separated, Maverick Bill thinking this would decrease the chances of their freeing themselves. Apart, they could not aid each other, nor plot for their release.

Irene Romero was not aware of this when she left her apartment some time after the departure of her father, and stole softly to the point where she had last seen the prisoners. She was in a state of great mental unrest, and a sudden wish to again see and talk with Sidney had come over her. As an excuse for making the visit, she carried a few table delicacies, which had doubtless been stolen by Maverick's men from some raided ranch.

She found Philip Sidney in the old prison niche, and the borderman gone; and, on inquiring concerning him, was told how they had been separated, and the supposed reason.

Sidney was as fully glad to see the girl as she was to again see him. The outlaws had been gathered for a conference over the startling news they had just received. Sidney knew that a council of some nature was being held, and was rejoiced that the girl had made her visit at so opportune a time.

"You are quite well?" was her anxious question, offering him the delicacies, as if he were an invalid.

Her too evident solicitude emboldened him to speak on the subject uppermost in his mind. He chose to advance to it by degrees, however.

"Don't you think you could help me again?" he asked, looking earnestly at her.

He could see she had been crying, and wondered if it was about him. A thrill of hope and joy came with the suggestion.

"I'm afraid it will be impossible!" setting the delicacies aside, when she saw he did not mean to taste any of them. "Father knows that I released you before, and he will watch to see that I don't do it again."

Her tones told him she had no particular desire he should be hurried from her.

"I don't believe I want to go!" he declared, boldly taking one of her hands. "It seems to me I should prefer to remain here with you."

He could scarcely discern the heightened color that came to her cheeks, but he did see the quick, backward look she gave toward the entrance to assure herself no one was near. She did not draw away her hand, nor seem angry at what he had said.

"Oh, Irene!" and his clasp tightened. "I don't feel that I could go away from here without you, even if I were free!"

"Then you—you—"

"Yes, I do love you, Irene!—if that is what you were trying to say. I don't know why I should have felt so toward a stranger, but I loved you when I first saw you, and it seems to me that I love you more and more every hour! I can't go away without you!"

His utterance was hurried and eager, and his grip tightened until his fingers left their marks.

"I was afraid you did not love me," she whispered, drawing closer to him. "If I had learned you did not, it would have killed me!"

He tried to put up his bound hands to clasp her, but could not. She stooped and gave him a quick kiss; then drew back as if fearful for the result of her own boldness.

"I didn't want you to go until you said that, but now I am willing for you to go. I will help you, and we will go together."

Her tones were passionate and earnest. She leaped to her feet and hurried toward the entrance, where she took a survey of the chambers and avenues adjacent. She was pleased to see that they were all vacant. She heard the sounds of voices in a room near the corral, and approached it to learn what was in progress. When she knew what was going on, she smiled; and then tip-toed back to where she had left Sidney.

"I will release you, now, in a very short time," she promised, bending down and giving him another kiss. "I haven't any knife with

me, or I would cut your bonds this moment. But I will get one. First, though, I think I had better make arrangements for our flight. I ought to get some horses ready, and attend to some other things.

"Oh, my love! You don't know how it hurts me to see those cords on you! But I'm afraid it is best for you to remain so a little while—until my preparations are made. It would prevent suspicion should my father or any of the men come near here."

He was unable to clasp her, though he desired to do so; and seeing this, she threw her arms about his neck and sobbed hysterically. A wild, untrained child of the prairie, she gave way to her full flood of feeling, without any endeavor to stifle or hold it in check.

"Now, I must go," she whispered, drawing away and rising to her feet. "A minute's delay may spoil all. Father and his men are holding a council, but it's likely to end at any time."

"One thing," said Sidney, his mind reverting to Old Joe, whom in his great ecstasy he had almost forgotten. "Old Joe must go with us. I can't leave him. I should never be able to forgive myself if I did. You can arrange for him to go along?"

She hesitated.

"He must go, you say?"

"He must go with us!" was his firm declaration.

"It may bother me to fix it, but I think I can. I want him to go, too, for he has been kind to me; and he seems to be a nice old man. He is not your father?"

Sidney replied in the negative, with a laugh.

"Good-by, then, for a little while!" turning to trip lightly away.

As she faced toward the entrance, she stopped, petrified. Her father was there, having just made his appearance.

He saw the excited look in her face, and her glance of despair.

"You little minx, what air you up to, now?" he demanded.

She could not reply on the instant, so great was her disappointment, and he accepted this as an acknowledgment of guilty intentions.

"You were goin' to release him!" striding wrathfully forward. "I'm thinkin' it's a good thing I come jist when I did!"

The council had not reached a conclusion, yet, but Maverick had been led to make this untimely visit because of his well-grounded fears of his daughter's treachery.

She threw up her hands as if to ward off a blow, and cowered for a moment; then she drew herself defiantly erect.

"What were you two plotting to do?" recoiling a little before her fierce look. "What was you talkin' about?"

"This," she said, in a tone that had a deadly steadiness about it. "This young man, Philip Sidney, has told me that he loves me, and I intend to marry him!"

"Oh, is that it? A nice time, an' a nice place, for billin' an' cooin'. I don't think you'll want to marry him, after he's been made into a cold corpus!"

"What do you mean by that?" was her startled demand.

"Oh, nothin'!" evading her glance. "It strikes me, though, that you might find somethin' better to do than to be makin' up this way to a feller that'd be tickled to death to see me hung. I always thought a girl's first love belonged to her father. I guess I was mistaken."

"You were not mistaken!" advancing impulsively toward him. "You have had my love for these many years. You will not forbid that I should love him now?"

He shook off her touch.

"A nice way to show your love for me to turn against me at the very first chance! I hardly thought it of you, Irene. You haven't confessed that you meant to let the feller go. You needn't confess it. I know you did."

He looked beyond her to where Phil Sidney lay, and his glance was threatening.

This sudden interruption of his dream of bliss was a terrible blow to Sidney. He was writhing and struggling against the cords that held him, wildly anxious to fly at the throat of Maverick Bill.

The outlaw chief realized something of this, and chuckled in a pleased way.

"When you succeed in lettin' that feller go, come an' let me know about it!" turning sharply on Irene. "It will not be in a hurry, I'm thinkin'!"

"I did intend to let him go!" she exclaimed, with savage bitterness. "Strike me for it, if you want to!"

He raised his hand as if for a moment he was tempted to do what she said.

"Bah! You're crazy, Irene. Crazy as a lunatic! If it wasn't for that, I might strike you. You'd have let him go, would you? And I reckon you'd have tried to go with him."

"I should," she confessed, with impressive emphasis.

"I thought as much, when you talked to me last. That's why I didn't care to leave you alone very long. Well, you'll not go with him; nor let him go! I'll see to that!"

He stepped aside and pointed sternly toward the entrance.

"You march along there, without provokin' me further. I've got enough to think about jist now, without havin' to worry over you. You'll go right back to your room, and you'll stay there; for I'll set a guard there to see that you do. If that don't answer, I'll tie you up!"

There were no indications of relenting in his words, and Phil Sidney saw that the last chance of escape was gone. The girl could not aid him, now, much as she desired to.

"Oh, father!" Irene moaned, gaspingly; but she knew it was not safe to refuse to obey, and went sobbing in the direction pointed out.

Maverick Bill lingered a moment; then hurled this threat at Sidney:

"I don't think you'll git to see her ag'in, my brave young rooster! If the men don't change their minds on the subject, it's my idea that you're about to the end of your rope!"

CHAPTER XVII.

UNPLEASANT KNOWLEDGE.

OLD LONE HAND had been placed in a small room nearer the corral, and he had not been there many minutes when he discovered that there was a horse in a narrow, stall-like place adjoining the little pocket-like apartment which he himself occupied.

He twisted about to get a view of the horse-stall, and was astonished and somewhat terrified when he discovered that it held the phantom horse!

His attention was drawn from it by the sounds of voices coming from a point some distance away. He fancied he recognized the deep notes of Maverick Bill, and became anxious to know what was being said. It might concern himself and Sidney, and be of great importance.

There seemed to be an open passage leading in the direction of the sounds, and he began to roll slowly that way, every revolution of his body bringing him nearer and nearer to the speakers. This took him further from the phantom horse, also, a thing he by all means desired.

He brought up finally against a wall, and heard the voices just beyond it. He could readily recognize them, now, and could understand what was being said. He was against the wall of the council room occupied by Maverick and his men.

What he heard was of a startling character. It revealed to him that Ben Stetson was supposed to be leading the troopers of Fort Yucca against Prairie Gibraltar. In spite of the low estimate Old Joe placed upon the soldiers, he was not sorry to hear this news.

But he heard something else that was not so pleasant. He found that the council had decided to stand by the stronghold and defend it to the last; and that to make themselves secure from any treachery from within, they had resolved to sacrifice the lives of Old Joe and Sidney. The prisoners were to be shot before the coming of the troopers.

This decision had been hastened by Maverick Bill's discovery of the duplicity of his daughter. Reference was made to this, but in such a way that the old borderman was not able to comprehend it.

"I'll hev to git out o' this in some way," he thought, as he glued his ear to the rocky wall. "Old Joe don't intend to let himself an' pard to be shot down like a couple uv dogs if he kin help it. Not by a jugful!"

He realized the preciousness of the fleeting minutes, and immediately began to tug and strain at the cords on his wrists. He had tried them before, but now his desperation lent him increased strength and determination.

"I'm jist bound to git away!" he panted, stopping for a moment because of the pain. "I jist must git out uv these things!"

Then he renewed the contest.

He was paying no heed to the voices, now, nor to the phantom horse, whose shining coat he could still dimly see. He was thinking of himself and Sidney and the great peril they were in. Whether they were to live or die,

seemed to depend wholly on his present success or failure.

A low cry escaped him, as he felt the tense cords give slightly, unable to longer withstand the tremendous force he was exerting. He surged at them again and again, until the veins on his arms stood out in knots. Drops of sweat were on his forehead, while he writhed as if in the agony of a great pain. The cords cut cruelly into his flesh, but of this he seemed insensible.

Finally one of the strands parted, this bringing about a loosening of all the cords on his wrists. Tears welled to his eyes as he lay back, almost exhausted, yet realizing he would soon be free. Free to help himself and Sidney!

He hearkened for a moment to the words that were still proceeding from the council-chamber. He cared little what was being said, now, being only desirous to know that the men were still there.

He sat up and removed the bonds from his aching arms, then tried to untie those that held his feet. The knots were drawn tight, and his fingers were so numb he could not do this; but he got hold of a jagged piece of granite, and by a diligent sawing with its roughened edge, at length cut through the thongs.

His limbs and body felt wofully cramped, but in spite of this, he staggered to his feet and began to grope his way toward the apartment where he had last seen the young ranchman.

He was not aware that a guard had been placed over the room occupied by the girl. Had he known this, he would have taken greater precautions. The guard selected by Maverick for this purpose was the messenger who had come in so short a time before, and he was so tired and sleepy that he was half-dozing at his post of duty. In his ignorance of the guard's presence, and in the darkness, Old Lone Hand stumbled heavily against this man.

He instinctively leaped back as he did so, filled with a foreboding of trouble. The kick which Joe had given him brought to the guard a rude awakening. He sprang up in blind haste, and when Lone Hand turned to run, he lunged out his revolver and fired wildly down the passage, well knowing that this was not a member of the band.

The shot and the guard's calls brought Maverick Bill and his comrades tumbling out of the council-chamber, and these quickly filled the space which the borderman would have been compelled to pass over to reach Sidney. Being between him and the fire, that burned low in the large room, he could see them, though they could not see him. He realized that it would be suicidal to try to pass them.

"This is awful!" he moaned, as he halted a moment, in bewilderment. "They'll do up the boy, shore!"

Like a flash came a thought of the soldiers who were presumed to be at that moment marching on Prairie Gibraltar. Of himself, he could do nothing; but he might reach these troopers and hurry them to the rescue, before it was too late.

To do this he must have a horse, and he knew of none but the one he so dreaded. The Specter Steed was still standing in its stall, where he had last seen it. Would he dare to make use of it?

He was almost frenzied.

"I reckon I'll hev to!" he declared. "There don't seem to be any other chance. The thing can't more'n kill me, an' I'll be killed if I stay hyer; an' if I don't go, Sid'll be killed, too!"

He was not given much time for reflection or debate. Maverick and the outlaws were advancing along the passage in his direction. From Maverick's loud commands he knew that a man was being sent to the corral to cut him off. He must act at once, if at all.

The excitement had driven from his mind all thought of the pain and cramps which had lately troubled him. He turned toward the phantom horse and ran on with the nimbleness of youth. The shouts of the outlaws behind him acted as a spur.

He did not stop to search for a bridle, but deftly loosened the rope halter with which the animal was tied; and then hurried with it through the contracted avenue leading to the corral.

He was only a moment or two in gaining the opening, and as soon as he saw the starlight above him and the horse, he leaped on the horse's back, dug his heels into its flanks, and by a pressure of his knees guided it toward the corral gateway which he had that night seen to be open.

As he did this, a strange thing happened. As the horse sprang forward in obedience to the urgent kicks, the singular glow faded from

its coat, causing Old Joe to utter an exclamation of alarm. His fears were so aroused by this phenomenon that he was tempted to slide from its back and trust to his heels. He might have done so, had not the calls of Maverick's men sounded so perilously near. There was one thing he could not gainsay: Whether he was astride of a horse or the spirit of a horse, it was bearing him by marvelous leaps from the presence of his enemies.

Although Old Joe did not think of it at the time, it was a fortunate thing for him that the queer light faded just when it did. Otherwise, he would have become the target of well-directed bullets. With the disappearance of the glow, the outlaws had nothing with which to guide them in their aiming.

Old Joe and his odd steed dashed through the opening in the corral barrier and sped straight toward the prairie. Pistol-shots still rung out, though none of the balls had come near him. He could tell by the sounds of the men's voices that they were hurrying out some animals which they had kept somewhere hidden, thus showing that they meant to pursue him.

"Ketch me if you kin!" was his grim comment, scarcely uttered above a whisper. "This nag I'm a-ridin' is a hummer, an' so long as it don't shine up like a lamp, I don't feel so much afeard—"

The sentence was brought to an abrupt conclusion. The phosphorescent glow came again, reducing the old borderman to a state of abject terror.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A TIME FOR HASTE.

THE yell that arose behind him told him that the horse was seen by the outlaws. They would be able to follow it by the light, thus increasing the danger of recapture.

The horse galloped steadily forward in an easy, tireless manner, that went to prove its mettle and endurance. In spite of his fears, Old Lone Hand could not but be pleased with the way the Specter Steed was leaving his foes.

The play of the firm muscles on the shoulders, which he could readily feel with his extended knees, the obedience with which it responded to this guiding, the steady sound of the hoof-falls, all tended to dispel the idea that the horse was a supernatural creature; and as the minutes passed without bringing any other mysterious manifestation, Old Joe again took courage.

"Flyin' steeds o' the Arabians! I guess I've been a fool all along. I've always been taught never to look a gift horse in the mouth; an' hyer I've been examin'in' every tooth o' this'n, as it were, tryin' to make out it's no good—an' it a-doin' its level best fer me without money an' without price! It's got queer-lookin' hair, but that oughtn't to count ag'in' it so long as it does what it kin to save Sidney an' me."

It was soon evident that the phantom horse was fleet of foot than any of those ridden by the outlaws, for the thunder of the pursuit grew steadily fainter and fainter.

"Good hoss! Good hoss!" giving the shining coat a series of loving pats. "Purty is as purty does; and, accordin' to that, you're the handsomest creeter above ground. I'll take back ever'thing I've said ag'in' ye. I'll adopt the sentiments o' the feller's toast to the women: 'I can't understand ye; but God bless ye! I love ye!'"

The horse comprehended the kindly tone and action, if it did not comprehend the words, and seemed to gather new vigor from them.

Old Joe's thoughts were almost constantly on Phil Sidney; and, when he could no more bear his enemies, he changed his direction for a crossing of the river where he knew the troopers must pass on their way to Prairie Gibraltar. It was a time for haste. Every moment was of the utmost importance, and he began to realize more and more how fortunate a thing it was that he was mounted on so fleet and spirited a steed.

He could not divest himself of the feeling that what he was doing seemed like a base abandonment of the young ranchman. Had he believed there was any chance whatever to aid Phil Sidney by an immediate return to the robber home, he would not have hesitated a moment to retrace his way. But he knew that, aroused as the outlaws were, he could do nothing, single-handed. To go back would be only to place himself again in their clutches. It was an emergency in which the Committee of One must seek other help.

He would not allow himself to dwell on Phil's present peril, nor on the fact that the young ranchman's death had been decreed. Of course, he could not keep all thought of this out of his

mind; but he tried to look forward to a meeting with the troopers, and a hurried march for relief.

Untiring as the phantom steed seemed, it began to show some signs of exhaustion before the river crossing was reached.

The old borderman drew it down into a slow gait, and carefully noted its labored breathing.

"It's a dead shore thing that this ain't no spirit hoss!" he soliloquized. "I reckon, now, a spirit hoss would never git tired at all; and it's safe to bet that one uv 'um wouldn't hev lungs to thump like that."

He felt of its moist, steaming coat, which shone on, in spite of the perspiration that bathed it.

"Reg'lar sweat," he mused, rubbing his fingers together and pressing them to his nostrils. "Reg'lar hoss sweat, too. It do puzzle me, though I don't think I'll be afraid o' the thing any more."

The night was far advanced when he reached the crossing; and his coming created quite as much of a panic as Sidney had occasioned among his own cowboys some nights before. The troopers had gone into camp on the northern bank of the stream, and were awaiting the return of Ben Stetson and a scout who had departed some hours previous to spy out the land at Prairie Gibraltar.

Neither the troopers nor their commander had ever heard of the phantom horse, and when Old Joe was seen moving across the prairie toward the camp at a good canter, a state of intense excitement supervened. The soldiers tumbled out as one man to view the singular sight and to speculate concerning it. But for the rigid discipline under which they were always held, many of them would have fled, as the phantom horse came nearer and nearer.

The fussy little colonel, who was in charge of the expedition, always made it a point not to show the white feather on any occasion; and he sent a messenger out to intercept their queer-looking visitor, and to inquire his business.

"Oh, this hoss!" and Old Joe chuckled grimly, as he was halted, and understood the cause. "He's a singular critter, shore; but, pard, he's a hummer. His hair seems to be a little off, but he brung me frum Prairie Gibraltar quicker'n any beast I ever straddled. Whatever he may do, or however he may look, I'll al'ays put that down to his credit. Show me the way to yer boss. I've a message that must be delivered instanter."

A wondering crowd gathered about the horse, when he had been brought into camp, and many were the explanations and comments of the men. He was of a docile disposition, and suffered himself to be handled and pinched. He was subjected to a most rigid examination; but all that was learned by it is just what the reader already knows. His coat seemed like the coat of any other horse, save that it shone something like phosphorus.

Old Joe was at once conducted before Colonel Tomlinson and questioned as to his errand; and in hurried sentences told why he had come, and expressed the great need of haste.

Tomlinson disliked to do anything out of the regular routine, and, having sent Ben Stetson and a scout to make an examination of Prairie Gibraltar, it seemed to him to be the proper thing to await their report.

"If ye do, cunnel, it'll bring about the death uv the boy!" Old Joe protested. "He may be dead already, shot to pieces by them murderin' kyotes, though I'll never believe it tell I'm forced to. I'm a-takin' it fer granted that he's still alive, an' that if we move out uv hyer on the jump, we'll be in time to save him. Daylight'll come onto you, cunnel, if you wait fer the comin' o' yer scouts, an' that'll spile ever'thing. With a good light to shoot by, the fellers behind them rock walls kin hold a rig'ment."

Colonel Tomlinson was not insensible to the force of this argument. There was only one thing that kept him from acceding at once to Old Joe's request. He did not know Old Joe; a fact which he stated with rough bluntness.

"My good fellow, if I had any way to assure myself that what you say is true, I'd move on Prairie Gibraltar immediately. How can I tell that you may not be playing me false? How can I know that you are not one of these outlaws yourself, and have come here to draw me into a trap? If Ben Stetson was here, now, he could settle it."

Old Joe was irritated by this, though he could not fail to recognize the weight of the argument. He knew that such tricks had been played.

All he could do was to reassert the uprightness of his intentions and the truth of his story.

"Tha they we earnestly petition again for an instant Theiment of the troops. cil was 'll trust you!" Tomlinson declared, his bet-and d nature gaining the ascendancy. "You will thing compelled, though, to keep with the troopers, flighd I must warn you that no attempt at treach-age'y will be tolerated. I should not deviate from they first plans, were it not for the peril you state Y this young man to be in."

Tears of gratitude came to the eyes of the old borderman, at this concession. He cared not what Tomlinson might think of him for the present. His honesty would soon be made apparent; and—the thing he most sought—Phil Sidney would be saved. He would not for a moment admit to himself that there could be any other outcome.

Almost immediately the bugle sounded—and the soldiers, gathered about the phantom horse, staggered backward in dismay! The horse started at the unaccustomed sound, and the glow of his coat vanished. Old Joe was a witness of this, and it convinced him that the cause of these disappearances was a start or fright received by the animal.

The men were given no time to discuss this marvel. "Boots and saddles" was the order, and in a very short time the entire body of men and horses were under way, heading at a rapid pace toward the rocky stronghold held by Maverick Bill.

CHAPTER XIX.

CONDEMNED TO DIE.

To return to Philip Sidney, still in the power of his enemies at Prairie Gibraltar.

He heard the excited cries announcing the escape of Old Joe, and earnestly prayed that his friend might elude all pursuit.

For himself, he knew he was in the greatest peril. He had not learned of the decree of the council, but Maverick Bill's ominous threats made at the time Irene was ordered to her room, clearly revealed the chief's hatred toward him.

By careful listening he was able to catch the sounds, made by the horses as they raced off on the prairie. It seemed to him that all of the outlaws must be chasing the old man, and therefore he thought it a good time for Irene to return to fulfill her promise. He could not believe she was at that moment a guarded prisoner.

He grew more and more nervous and restless as the moments slipped by without bringing her. The delay told him that something of an uncommon nature was detaining her. He believed in and trusted her implicitly, and would not for a moment harbor the thought that she might be false to her professions.

True love casts out every doubt; and it was so in this case. He loved her sincerely, and felt that the reason she did not come to him at once must be because she could not.

One of the pursuers straggled back after awhile, and Sidney could hear him talking with the guard in the passage beyond. He was speaking of the chase; and his speech revealed that Maverick Bill and the other outlaw were still trying to overtake Old Joe; and that their effort was likely to prove a failure.

This was indeed good news, and was received thankfully.

The outlaw came into the main apartment in a short time, and Sidney called to him, inquiring the meaning of the row, pretending to be ignorant of his friend's escape.

The man came forward in answer to the call, and vouchsafed the information that Old Joe had managed to wriggle out of his bonds; but that he was being pursued and would surely be overhauled in a little while.

Sidney knew the fellow lied, for this contradicted the statement made to the guard.

"I suppose the girl went with her father?" Sidney questioned, trying thus to learn something concerning her, and making a great effort to veil his uneasiness.

The outlaw laughed.

"It'd please ye, likely, if I'd tell ye she'd run off with yer pard. But she didn't go with him, ner she didn't go with Maverick. She's gitting a little too tricky of late to be trusted; an' so the old man shet her up in her room and fixed the cage so that the bird couldn't git away. Ef you've got any love-letters to send to her, it'll tickle me to death to take 'em."

This was not pleasant news. It increased Sidney's misery to know that Irene was really held a prisoner. He pictured her sitting in the gloom of the rocky pocket which was known as her room, weeping hysterically; and this picture did not fall far short of the actual truth.

Irene was acquainted with her father's vin-

dictiveness; and she felt that the escape of Old Joe would in all probability insure the death of her lover. Yet she could do nothing to avert this terrible fate. She passed from paroxysms of despair to moments of hopefulness, and in these latter intervals she would plead with the guard to be let go. Time and again she attempted to bribe him into compliance with her wishes, but without avail.

And thus an hour wore away, bringing the return of Maverick and his associate.

Maverick Bill was in a tempestuous rage, occasioned by Old Joe's success. He feared the borderman might intercept the troopers that were hurrying forward under Ben Stetson, and thus be able to acquaint them with the small force now at Prairie Gibraltar. This would be an unfortunate thing for the outlaws, as it would increase the confidence of their enemies and tend to make them more courageous.

He was in a state of great anger, as he threw himself from his horse in front of the entrance, and it was his intention to have Philip Sidney shot without delay. He felt that this would partially atone for the escape of the other prisoner, and would likewise rid his small force of an encumbrance. It would also prevent all chance of a similar breaking away.

He was prevented from carrying this bloody plan into instant execution by a clatter of hoofs outside the corral. A few moments of confusion ensued; then a yell of delight went up from Maverick and his few followers, when they knew that the new-comers were members of the outlaw band. It was a much needed reinforcement, and greatly added to the chances of a successful resistance.

Maverick Bill welcomed his recruits effusively; and, when their horses had been concealed in a series of stall-like niches, he led them into the council-room and there explained to them the nature of the peril threatening Prairie Gibraltar.

The fact that these men had seen nothing and heard nothing of the troops gave color to the belief that the danger had been exaggerated.

Maverick Bill's determination to stand by the stronghold was received with approval by all present. No other such safe retreat could be found anywhere on the plains, and they were loth to abandon it.

A shout from the guard in the passage, accompanied by a wild cry from Irene, brought the council to an abrupt termination.

When Maverick Bill hurried out to ascertain the meaning of these sounds, he found that Irene had defiantly dashed by her keeper and rushed to the point where Philip Sidney was lying. She had a knife in her hand; and before the guard could come up with her, she began sawing at Sidney's bonds.

The sight so angered Maverick that he flew at her like a madman; and, grasping her by the shoulder, hurled her heavily backward to the stone floor. So great was her excitement, however, that what would have seemed a serious fall on any other occasion seemed to injure her not at all. She sprang up with an inarticulate heart-broken cry, and there was in her eyes a look that was almost of insanity.

"You ungrateful hussy!" he shrieked, again advancing on her, as she arose with uplifted knife.

It seemed a question for a moment whether she intended to use it on herself or on him.

"Stand back!" she commanded. "Stand back!"

Instead of heeding the words he rushed at her, and with a blow dashed the knife from her hand. Then he seized her again and shook her mercilessly.

The state of Philip Sidney's mind during this exciting time can scarcely be imagined. Her appearance had brought him hope; which was destined to be dashed ruthlessly to the ground in an instant. A wild desire to cast off his bonds and spring tiger-like on Maverick Bill swelled within him. He writhed and groaned and strained at his cords like a lashed beast.

"You infernal scoundrel!" he howled, his indignation passing all bounds when he beheld Maverick strike the hapless girl. "Untie me for a minute, and I'll teach you better manners than to hit a woman. I'll kill you for that, Maverick. So help me God, I will!"

So great was his wrath that all fear for his own personal safety left him. Had he been free, he would at that moment have fought all of the outlaws single-handed.

"You keep quiet there!" Maverick ordered, with a savage look. "If you don't shut your mouth, I'll shut it with a bullet. I'm running this business jist now; and I'll take pleasure in attendin' to you a little later!"

Irene was screaming hysterically and essaying vainly to free herself.

Maverick Bill was a very giant in strength, and he lifted her up with no gentle touch, and set her heavily on her feet, when she had fallen a second time from a brutal push given her.

"Now, march out of hyer, my young lady! March! d'ye hear?"

"I won't!" she vociferated. "You mean to kill him, and I won't go!"

He drew back his hand as if to strike her in the face. She dodged the expected blow and darted toward Sidney; but Maverick's arm interposed and held her struggling.

"If you won't walk out, I'll carry you out!" was his harsh declaration. "This nonsense has gone fur enough."

He pushed her bodily toward the larger apartment, retaining a constant and firm grip on her arm.

"I'll settle with this young hound; and then, my lady, I'll settle with you!"

"You're a coward!" Sidney shouted after him. "No one but a coward would treat a lady that way!"

The taunt stung Maverick Bill to the quick, and he halted as if strongly tempted to turn back and end the author of the tantalizing words then and there. Irene's screams and struggles were probably what prevented him from doing this. He contented himself with giving Sidney a look of withering hate, and then pushed the half-frantic girl on before him.

Sidney could hear her moan when he could no longer see her, and this caused him to make another ineffectual effort to release himself.

Maverick Bill came back in a short time, and laughed with fiendish glee, as he saw the young man's writhings and beheld his look of anguish.

For further security Irene had been bound this time, a fact he took great pleasure in impressing on his helpless prisoner.

"You're a coward!" Sidney again boldly vouchsafed. "A dirty, miserable cur! You can shoot me; and I have no doubt you will; but you can't keep me from saying that!"

Doubtless Sidney's extreme anger kept him from a full realization of the peril of his position. At that moment he appeared not to care whether he lived or died.

"You can talk all you want to, my young game chicken. You'd better put in full time, too, fer you won't have many minutes in which to fling insults."

Maverick's men were crowding about him once more; and to those the outlaw chief gave his commands.

"Pick the dog up and take him out to the corral. Tie him there, an' we'll shoot him so full of holes that a coyote wouldn't look at him!"

Sidney was immediately seized by the outlaws, who lifted him and bore him from the place. He was as helpless as a child in their hands; but in spite of this he continued to rave at them, and especially at Maverick Bill, in a peculiarly exasperating strain.

Irene heard him as he was borne along the passage past her room, and her wailing rose afresh.

He shouted to her a farewell; and would have said more, had not one of the men rudely laid a hand on his mouth.

It required but a short time to gain the corral; and against an angle of its rocky wall Sidney was placed in an upright posture, and there secured.

At Maverick's command the men drew off; and then raised their weapons to fire, only awaiting Maverick's order to do so.

But the order never came.

Instead, there arose a charging cheer, and a crash and blaze of firearms from the corral gate.

CHAPTER XX.

DEFEAT OF THE THIEVES.

THE troopers, urged on by Old Joe, had arrived in the nick of time.

Though startled and somewhat panic-stricken by the suddenness and unexpectedness of this onset, Maverick Bill and his men turned instantly to repel the charge. They would have had better success in this, if they had not been caught almost unprepared. They had been hourly expecting the troopers, but the trouble and confusion occasioned by Sidney and Irene had led them to this reckless laxity.

There were probably no braver men in the Cimarron region than Maverick Bill and the outlaws who rallied under him, and they made one of the most desperate fights on record. But they could not successfully cope with so strong a force in the open corral. They stood manfully to their

ground, however, retreating slowly toward the opening into the stronghold until Maverick Bill fell mortally wounded. Then the others broke, and attempted to save themselves by a flight into the interior. One other of their number was shot down before they could escape from the corral, into which the victorious troopers were pouring like a resistless tide.

The demoralized thieves gave no heed whatever to the miserable girl tied up in the seclusion of her room, nor did they attempt to defend the opening, but ran hither and thither, seeking some safe hiding-place.

It seemed almost a miracle that Philip Sidney was not slain by one of the many balls that for a time flew like hail across the inclosure, and which battered themselves against the rocks around him. He shouted wildly to the soldiers, knowing them to be friends; but in the uproar they did not hear him.

However, when the outlaws retreated behind the rocky barriers of the stronghold proper, he managed to make himself heard and understood. The first to reach his side was Old Joe.

"It's you, boy! Thank God!"

With that he whipped out his knife, and with quick strokes cut the cords that held the young ranchman.

The troopers were crowding into the narrow passage through which they had seen the robbers retreat.

"Come!" exclaimed Sidney, after hurriedly mumbling his thanks, "Irene is in there. We must save her!"

He hastened forward, dragging the old man at his side.

The dawn was just breaking along the eastern sky, betokening the quick coming of day; and, as they ran on, they recognized, even by this dim light, the prostrate body of Maverick Bill.

The outlaw chief was not dead, a fact evidenced by his moanings.

They had no time to devote to him just then. The safety of Irene was the thought uppermost in the minds of both.

They found the passage almost clear, and Sidney was able to make his way direct to her room. The troopers had sped on in quest of the terror-stricken thieves.

Irene uttered a cry of fright, as she saw two men appear at the opening to her apartment; but this was changed to an exclamation of joy, when she knew who they were.

Sidney lost no time in releasing her, and then took her in his arms and kissed her again and again, oblivious of the fact that Old Joe was standing near.

"That's all right!" the old borderman said, encouragingly. "I kin recollect very well that I was young onc't myself. May yer joy last ferever, with never a cup o' sorrer in it!"

The pursuit of the outlaws was quickly ended. Such of them as were not killed threw down their weapons and begged for mercy.

The sun had risen when Old Joe and Sidney bethought themselves of Maverick Bill, and made their way again to the corral.

He was found still alive and conscious; and, when they saw this, they sent word of the fact to Colonel Tomlinson.

It was plain that Maverick could not live long; and Tomlinson instructed that he be brought into the large apartment and made as comfortable as possible. Tomlinson was a humane officer, in spite of his many faults.

"I want to speak to you," Maverick Bill whispered, beckoning to Old Joe.

Sidney and Irene were present in the room at the time, the latter weeping bitterly. She had been told that her father could not recover; and, although he had treated her so harshly and cruelly, she was not able to divest herself of the old feeling of filial affection and respect.

Old Joe came close to the cot of the dying outlaw, and bent forward to hear what he might have to say.

"It's all up with me!" Maverick whispered, a spasm of pain contorting his features. "I know that I've got to go, an' that I'm not prepared to go. I want to do what I can, though, to straighten out my account in this world. It's an ugly account, and beyond untangling; but mebbe I can do a little."

He paused as if for breath, or because of weakness, and looked earnestly at the sobbing girl.

"She thinks she's my daughter," nodding weakly toward her. "I wanted her to think so, an' so I never told her any better. But she ain't my daughter, Connetty; she's yours!"

Old Joe fell back with a gasp of astonishment, so completely dumfounded by this revelation that he could not speak, and could scarcely think. Then he turned toward Irene; and she, leaving Sidney's side, came bewilderedly for-

ward and was received into the borderman's open arms.

"I thought you was dead long ago!" Old Joe asserted, as if not yet able to believe what he had heard. "Shorely! shorely, it can't be true! It can't be that I've got my little Coral back ag'in!"

He ventured to touch her forehead with his roughened lips; and at this manifestation of pleasure she clung tightly to him and returned his kiss with interest.

The face of the dying outlaw wore a pleased smile as he witnessed this. It seemed to atone in some measure for his misdeeds.

"Tell me about it!" Old Joe pleaded. "I can't understand it at all!"

Thus appealed to, Maverick Bill told how Irene had come to be living with him as his own child. Instead of being carried away by the Indians, or killed by them, as had been thought, she had been slipped away at the time of the Indian raid by a servant who sought to escape with her. This servant must have been seriously wounded at the time. At any rate, he was found dead by Maverick Bill, where he had probably tumbled from his horse; and little Coral, as she was then called, was discovered sitting on the grass near the body, disconsolately weeping.

Maverick Bill took a fancy to her, and instead of restoring her to Joe Connetty—whom he well knew to be her father—he carried her away and reared her as his own daughter; and she was so young at the time, that all the instincts of her early childhood gradually faded from her memory.

Maverick Bill and the other outlaws slain in the fight at Prairie Gibraltar were buried near the rocky pile they had so long made their home.

The mystery of the phantom horse became a mystery no longer. An examination of it under all conditions—as well as the explanations offered by the captured thieves—showed that the strange glow, which has so frequently been mentioned, was really a freak of nature. The horse belonged to that type of nondescript animals whose peculiarities and oddities have gone to enrich Barnum and other showmen. Its hair apparently resembled the hair of any other horse; yet it possessed the property of emitting a phosphorescent light—a property which, when possessed by many other animals, fishes, glow-worms, and the like, excites no surprise whatever. The horse appeared to have some control over this light, and suppressed it whenever scared.

The figures seen mounting the canyon wall were nothing more than effects produced by deft manipulations of a magic lantern; and were intended—as was also the use of the horse—to keep enemies at a distance. The scared vision of Philip Sidney ascending this wall on the back of the horse, seen by Old Joe, was a reproduction of a photograph taken in the corral that day; Sidney being filled with fear at the time of its taking because of a cocked revolver held threateningly by Maverick Bill.

Philip Sidney and Coral Connetty were united in marriage a few days later; and there were great festivities and merry-making at Good Cheer Ranch, which became their future home. The wild, untrained girl developed into a model woman and wife, and Sidney grew to be one of the most prosperous ranchmen of the region.

Old Joe made his home with them for many years. The phantom horse was retained by them; and they used it with good effect in their dealings with the lawless element that for a long time troubled the country.

And so, with the kindest wishes, we leave them in the full enjoyment of earth's choicest blessings.

THE END.

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